

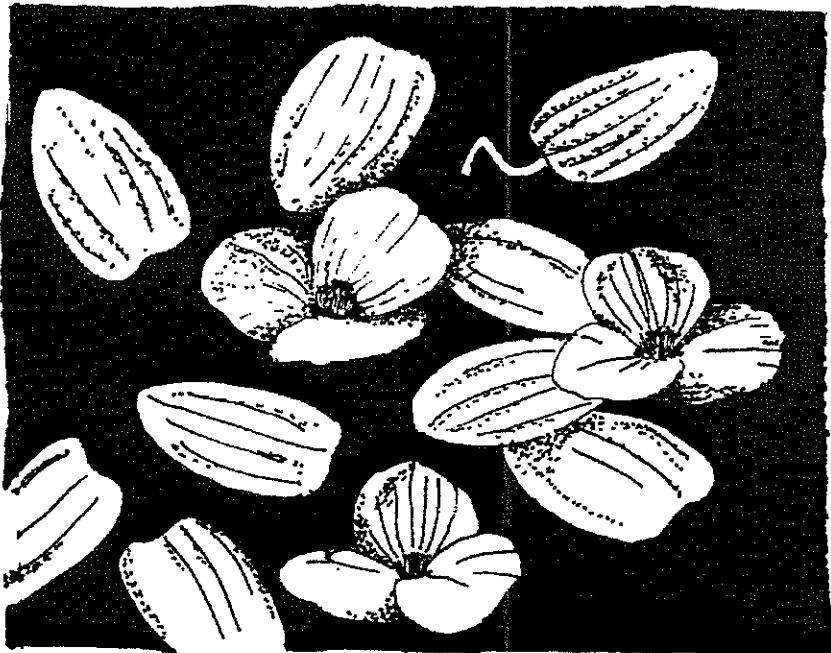
BEND OF ISLANDS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION INC. NEWSLETTER

President: Carol Bonny 9712 0648, C/- Post Office, Kangaroo Ground, Vic, 3097 - Editor, John McCallum 9712 0319

Inc. No. A11100A

Number 59 March 2004

WHAT LOCAL PLANT IS FLOWERING?



Botanical name: *Ottelia ovalifolia*

Common name: Swamp Lily

Family: Hydrocharitaceae (Swamp Lily Family)

Flowering period: November to March

An aquatic perennial herb with a tuft of floating leaves rising on long stems at the base. Grows in freshwater pools and slow moving streams, in water up to 0.6 m deep with stems rooting in underwater mud.

The leaves are long stalked, light green, oval, 50 - 150 mm. long with seven prominent long veins. Juvenile leaves are linear and submerged.

The flowers are large, (up to 50 mm across), held just above the water level on thick two lobed sheaths. The single white flowers consist of three broad petals with a dark reddish-purple base and yellow stamens. In cooler areas the plant bears smaller, submerged, unopened flowers which are self pollinating.

Ripe seeds are released underwater. Propagate by division or by seed, germinated by bog method.

Being an ornamental and non invasive pond plant, the swamp lily is a good alternative to water-lilies.

Swamp lily prefers an open position in full sun or semi shade with permanent water to 60 cm deep. Will tolerate drying out to mud in summer, though the plant is drought sensitive.

CRIC HENRY

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Don't you just love autumn. Great weather for erecting our long awaited roof. Now I know we are all watching the sky for those rain clouds but we would prefer it to stay dry just until we get the iron on. You can however thank the Bonnys for the overnight rain in the first week of March as that was the day we started putting the roof lining boards up and of course we didn't have a cover on them. No damage apart from a few sleepless hours worrying about the damp.

This issue has focused on the memories of Duggo and I would like to tell of our one and only meeting with Neil. A visit was arranged for Norm Linton Smith, Mick Woiwod, Alan and myself to meet with the Man at Point Smythe. A fascinating afternoon spent 'listening' to this amazing character who at the age of around eighty had a mind that was as sharp as a tack. We suffered the now famous cold weak tea as we sat uncomfortably in the ramshackle caravan he used as a studio. (His bedroom was his four wheel drive!) The water, gathered from a soak behind his caravan, was warmed on a small gas stove situated between his bare feet. To be accurate, he did have one sock on as he had a swollen foot after being bitten by a white tail spider. We were surrounded by his paintings in various stages of completion. One that I can vividly remember was about a 12"x 8" of a flock of crimson rosellas. Looking at it up close it was just a multitude of red and blue brush strokes that were a nice pattern, but step back and it was a perfect study of these colorful parrots in full flight through the box ironbark forest. I was sure I could hear them! After an afternoon of listening we bade our farewell never to see Duggo again. I'm glad I had the opportunity to speak with the man who had the foresight to make the Bend of Islands the sanctuary it is today. Thank you Neil Douglas.

See you round

CAROL BONNY

THE PICTURES IN THIS EDITION OF THE BICA NEWSLETTER ARE ALL BY NEIL (EXCEPT THE LIFE CLASS, KOALA CUB AND THE COVER ILLUSTRATION – THANKS SYD, HILARY AND CRIC) AND WERE TAKEN FROM NEWSLETTER 6, NOVEMBER 1982. THAT ISSUE COMMEMORATED THE DECLARATION OF THE ELZ AND THE COVER DEPICTED THE FLORAL RIBBON MADE FROM LOCAL PLANTS; THE KOOKA AND THE ORCHID WERE SNIPPED FROM THIS PAGE. THE OTHER ILLUSTRATIONS SEEM TO HAVE BEEN DRAWN ONTO THE TYPEWRITTEN PAGES TO FIT IN WITH THE TEXT PRIOR TO THE NEWSLETTER BEING PHOTOCOPIED. WITH CURRENT TECHNOLOGY IT WAS EASY TO SCAN THEM, RESIZE AS NEEDED AND PLACE THEM IN THE NEWSLETTER.

VALE NEIL DOUGLAS

In this edition of BICA News, we celebrate Neil Douglas and his contribution to the Bend of Islands. On a Sunday afternoon in November 2003, shortly after Neil died, a group of friends gathered to remember him and to share their reminiscences. Their memories and the recollections of others are included in this Newsletter. Janet opened proceedings on that day with these words.

"For us as a community living here in the Bend of Islands, the passing away of Neil Douglas is of particular significance.

Neil was the inspiration, the visionary, the real motivator behind the establishment of the Environmental Living Zone which today protects this very special area so close to Melbourne.

His keen artist's eye showed many of us who knew him and talked with him over many cups of tea what was so special about this "scraggy" bush, as he so often described it—the light, the colours, the animals, the choughs {which always delighted him} and the orchids which so magically appear each year from winter right through to the hyacinth orchids of summer.

He convinced us to work towards a goal of making this a Residential Conservation area. We should make it a place where we could live finding true enjoyment in the bush—be the custodians—not destroy it but enhance it.

Many people have worked tirelessly, inspired by Neil to achieve the Zoning and requirements to make his vision a reality.

The celebration we held in 1982 at Oxley Bridge and at Neil and Abbie's home was a truly magnificent milestone. Since then we have continued to face new challenges—new issues, new planning formats, new shire boundaries, new people in power and new residents to whom we try and pass on our knowledge and enthusiasm for living in this bush.

BICA and Round the Bend as organisations can only achieve and maintain Neil's concept through the goodwill and enthusiasm of the community.

We recognise that we have Neil to thank for not only the vision but also for showing us the way to achieve our goals—the sharing of knowledge—there is always something new to learn about the bush—the cups of tea, or perhaps it's the coffee mornings where we share our ideas on everything—and the many happy social events that bring our community together.

Today is an opportunity to share our memories of interacting with Neil and consider how far we have come in making his vision a reality. However we need to be mindful that there will always be another challenge around the corner."

NEIL DOUGLAS REMEMBERED

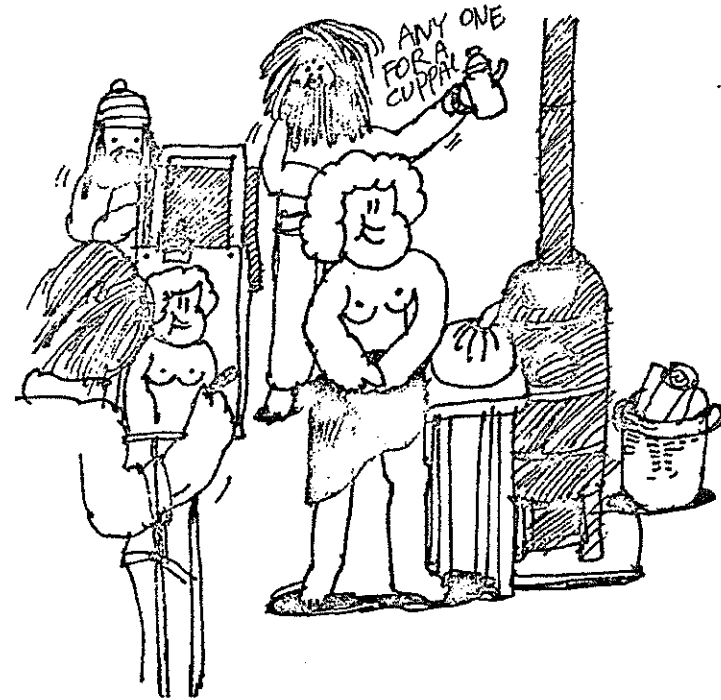
During my teenage years, my mother, Elsa, lived in a caravan behind Neil's house in Research which he shared with his wife, Vivvy, the three children, Helen (later called Abby) and a passing population, many of whom, like my mother, required some level of shelter or support. It could be described as an early 'women's shelter'. There was no power, running water or alcohol in the house. There was however a unique environment and atmosphere: a Neil Douglas creation that revealed his skill as a gardener, artist and guru. In the weekends Neil would take me into the bush and reveal the differences between greens of the native foliage declaring that Meldrum and his followers only saw the tone and totally missed the colour and texture of our native vegetation. This influenced the future direction of my life and my art. Neil generously used his art to promote a greater understanding of our natural environment. I consider myself fortunate to have the painting that he gave my mother but blessed to possess a few small examples of his ceramic work, which incorporates his humour, his exquisite line as well as his wonderful observation.

HILARY JACKMAN

Like most people who moved into the Bend of Islands we initially had little knowledge of the bush and the local community. However we were made well aware through Neil's charisma and dedication. Neil and Abby's "home gallery" was an inspiration, generously shared over cups of tea and yarns from the little furry man, all the time surrounded by magnificent paintings and pottery in a very typical owner built mud brick home. His creative vision was expressed in many ways. On the large scale he lobbied for the establishment of the Shire of Healesville's "Environmental Living Zone" to protect the bush from clearing and insensitive development. On a smaller scale, his home and garden expressed his eye for detail, his love of natural objects and his artistic creativity.

When Neil moved out of the area down to Venus Bay at Point Smythe we were lucky enough to be able to keep in contact with him and often visited him in his caravan or had meals with him at our shared holiday house. He was always energetic and enthusiastic and had become just as much of an identity at Tarwin Lower area as he was in the Bend of Islands. It is quite rare to come across a man like this, who with his integrity and strong love of the natural environment, communed with nature as a free spirit.

CRIC AND ROSS HENRY



We first met Neil at his Research home where we used to attend musical evenings. The house and garden were carefully maintained to achieve an air of rustic simplicity and cottage industry. We frequently encountered Neil sweeping the gravel drive with a straw broom. The furniture was a mixture of rough hewn and colonial and the women who lived there were artists and weavers. The other inhabitants of the house were Neil's children and dozens of cats.

Neil and Abby were building their house at the Bend when we bought our block, inspired by Neil's vision of bush living. We used to spend summer evenings with them in their garden where Neil would tell stories of his life and art. One story was about a similar gathering of friends in the garden when everyone was getting hungry but there was not enough food for a meal. One of the guests whose first language was not English pointed at the garden and said "But you have lots of pezzly, you can make soup." No one understood what she was referring to until she started picking large bunches of parsley and proceeded to make a very tasty soup.

MEGAN MCCALLUM

DUGGO

Mick Woiwod

Most everyone out here in the Bend of Islands has his or her good story about Neil Douglas and anything I might do in that direction wouldn't add much to our understanding of the man. Suffice to say he was a remarkable character - our own remarkable character! And that's something we ought always remember! The Bend of Islands wouldn't be what it is today without his input. The thing about Neil was that he had vision! Nothing unusual about that you might say; we all have our dreams but mostly they remain as such. Neil ran with his!

He spent years pushing them forward. He had the sort of charisma that saw even those unwilling to listen take heed. It didn't matter much to Neil whether it was one of the locals or a power in the land in for a cuppa. Neil always got his message across and he knew how to steal a headline! The media loved him because of the persona he presented. They came away with not only a great story, but a picture to support it. Over the years Neil became better known than almost any other Australian artist. He was keenly aware of his power with the media and used it to great effect to push his agenda.

Who among us would have dared appear at the gate of Government House barefoot - all beard and hair and homespun and hope to get away with it? Who else but Neil would have had the imagination to appear before a government panel to declare: 'I've come here today to speak on behalf of the kangaroos', or refer to the Bend of Islands as 'this last remaining patch of Pre-Captain Cook bush'.

'Duggo' was born into a world that has long since gone. We all love to see ourselves as good environmentalists but if we were to be true to ourselves we'd have to admit that much of the ground-work had already been done by individuals such as Neil Douglas with the foresight to transform their vision into reality.

It's not that Neil could ever be described as a true-blue environmentalist. He wasn't! He was a man of his times with a foot in two very different worlds. His first big battle was to save his mother's English cottage garden in Bayswater. He lost that one but went on to champion the big ones out here in the Bend of Islands - the government's decision to inundate it and his own more personal goal of one day seeing it in the hands of fellow dreamers eager to live in it with minimal impact upon it. Neil was no purist! Purists don't win the big ones. Instead, it had always to be a balancing act about hearts and minds; aware that he need stand somewhere left of centre to win the bureaucrats over to something as radical as 'nature conservation' in the 1970s.

"Duggo" was a remarkable Australian! He was an artist able to portray the bush of the Bend of Islands as nature had left it without glorifying it. He painted it with feeling in the way we have all come to understand and love.

Neil was a great conversationalist in his element with a cup of tea in his hand and someone to listen to his yarning. In May 1997 some of us locals went down to Point Smythe for his story - we only asked one question and away Neil went for something like four hours. At the age of 86 he had perfect recall. He has now become part of the Bend of Islands' mythology - our own 'bearded old man of the trees' floating around somewhere up there on a cloud with a mug of tea in one hand, the other waving around as he yarns to Zeus or some other imagined deity about the frailty of us mortals. Nobody, I'm sure, believes those Greek Gods did all the things the Greeks claim them to have done. They didn't! They were simply ordinary sheilas and blokes celebrated for the extraordinary things they did while alive - like what "Duggo" did!

To have a future the Bend of Islands needs to cultivate its mythology, not just for the next ten or twenty years or even the next 100. For the bush it has to be forever! As it is, planners could wipe out Neil's dream with the stroke of the pen. There has to be something ethereal in place to allow it continuity, say an annual bush painter's award, a story award like that for Alan Marshall, perhaps for excellence in ecology.

Such things don't require stacks of money. It's up to the community to see that the dream Neil helped create survives into the future. Neil saw the Bend of Islands from an Aboriginal perspective and there's an old Aboriginal saying:

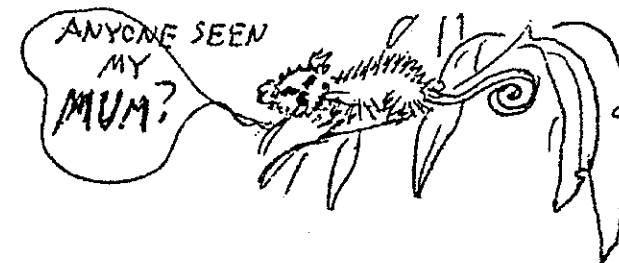
White man got no dreaming,

Him go 'nother way.

White man he go different.

Him got road belong himself.

Perhaps it's time we considered a change of approach.



NEIL REMEMBERED

I first met Duggo in October, 1971, when the Round the Bend Co-operative (Co-op.) was in its formative year. A few of us had heard of the Co-op. and it was about to be finalised into its current size. We went along to a meeting held at his house in the Bend of Islands and he was one of the main speakers. He was obviously a driving force behind the idea of a conservation community in this area.

At this time he would have been in his early 60's and a couple of years older than my own father and that is where the comparison ends. Here was this larger than life, fully energized individual holding court on the unique advantages of the Bend of Islands as a place to both live and conserve. The term used was a managed residential sanctuary to be created in a planned and controlled manner in partnership with the relevant government bodies and the residents.

We were convinced and we had our first taste of Duggo's persuasive tea diplomacy, with many cups drunk and much positive information provided. He was a man with a vision shared, but he was also our main publicist, who gained access to the many bureaucrats and politicians that were needed for our proposal. He was apolitical in his approach and always managed to see the top man relevant to the next step in our path towards acceptance. Duggo was able to get the newspapers to do feature articles on his lifestyle and he used his artistic ability and notoriety to great effect.

Eventually we were successful in gaining approval and Duggo's efforts were a major contribution to the result. This community owes Duggo a great debt and he will long be remembered.

NEIL HARVEY

I first met Neil in 1951 at a party at Tim Burstall's in Eltham. He was clean-shaven and wore a tweedy suit and a pork pie hat and shoes!!! I had been warned that he was a con merchant so was shrewd enough not to buy from him for a few pounds a couple of rather strange paintings by some bloke called Nolan.

Apart from occasional meetings at art shows etc I next had a good yarn with him in the late 60's in his aluminium tent where he lived with Abbie next to his small dam. By then he had a beard and some hair. He enthused about the Bend and wanted Monash to get involved with conserving it. Later, when he had built his mud house, I stayed with him from time to time and we painted together and schemed about saving the area. One major achievement was convincing the local estate agents to allow him to control land sales in the area without Neil claiming commission. This was a brilliant idea and although his arty mates like Matcham Skipper later sold their blocks, this delayed the development process. Some detractors say he took some of the commissions. I feel pretty certain he made nothing out of the scheme. He was starting to sell

his paintings so had some income.

Neil had great trouble selling the eight blocks on the Co-op land. He would get a couple of buyers but they would pull out as fast as he recruited them. I got an excited phone call one day summoning me to meet an environmental planner called Randall Champion who had proposed a co-operative idea. We had a number of meetings and soon involved others who ultimately formed the first small Co-op. One of my main tasks was to lobby Government people like MMBW planners, George Wright etc. and convince them that we would not be a hippy commune and steer them towards Neil's fatal cups of tea. Neil helped start the Co-op by buying a share himself and getting people like Alistair Knox to buy shares and hold them until real members could be found. I do not remember him doing much about the nitty gritty of organising the Coop; Randall did that. He gave Randall a painting to cover his fees and, although there was a hassle about that and other matters leading to Randall's ultimate exclusion, the major role played by Randall Champion should be remembered. Without him there would not be a Co-op.

The battle for the ELZ took much longer, even though many government officials considered it a good idea. Neil got support from the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Director Geoff Mosley became involved. A symposium on a Residential Conservation Zone was held on 7th August 1974. To support this Symposium a document "Residential Conservation" was written by Bob English, Gary Jungwirth, John Lawson, Mal McLure and myself. It was illustrated or rather decorated by Neil. (Copies should be in the Coop and BICA archives.) However without Neil and his long hair, beard and home spun suit there would have not been a Coop or an ELZ. I remember once when we called on Dick Hamer (Sir Richard Hamer, then Premier of Victoria), me in a suit with fibreglass brief case and Neil in his homespun suit and leather hat like Wild Bill Hickock. We looked an incongruous pair, but we made an impression on the steps of Parliament House and on Hamer. Once at an exhibition someone picked on Neil saying "That wildflower you are carrying is just a gimmick". Neil replied "There is nothing wrong with the flower, I'm the gimmick" He was pretty right there. He knew exactly what he was doing. He played a role and it worked to the benefit of all of us. As far as I know there is no painting of Neil's in the State Gallery although there is some pottery. Now he is dead, maybe this could be rectified.

TIM EALEY



A MEMORY OF NEIL

Because he always walked barefoot, Neil's footprint was light and the physical impact on the bush was light. However, his legacy of environmental conservation is profound. I will leave it to others to specify his contribution to spend this brief opportunity for reflection on a moment that has left a vivid impression on me. The memory captures the spirit of Neil, his humour and sense of mischief that characterised his relentless pursuit of his goals for the benefit of the environment. Indeed, I believe it was his human qualities that enabled him to be so effective in sharing his dream and mobilizing the power contained in others to make that dream a reality.

The occasion was a slide-show in Neil's mud-brick house. In the living area, complete with swing, stove, and hand made furniture and furnishings. In amongst the books, pictures and light beams and dark corners Neil indicated that he wanted to show slides to demonstrate how he perceived the bush. He started with a question: "I want you to tell me: what is the colour of the paint tube that I use most...red, orange, yellow...." He went through the colours of the rainbow. The consensus opinion was green which delighted Neil because he said that he now wanted to demonstrate why we were wrong. "It's blue. Yes blue...the bush is blue!" And off he went in that insane cackle that emerged from the wrinkles whenever he was amused.

He then proceeded to show us slides of the bush. As he flipped from slide to slide, talking incessantly, I started to become uncomfortable. They were out of focus. He'd take a look at each slide and fiddle with the focus, but still each was blurred. His words were about diversity and randomness and patterns and processes but the images were smudgy, the outlines were ill-defined and the subject matter was indecipherable. What started as a feeling of disquiet, developed into an acute sense of embarrassment for the man. Here he was, a famous artist giving a talk to some influential members of the Melbourne's political and planning establishment and the slides about which he was demonstrating his points were so far out of focus that his points were lost. The more I squirmed in my seat the more elated did Neil become.

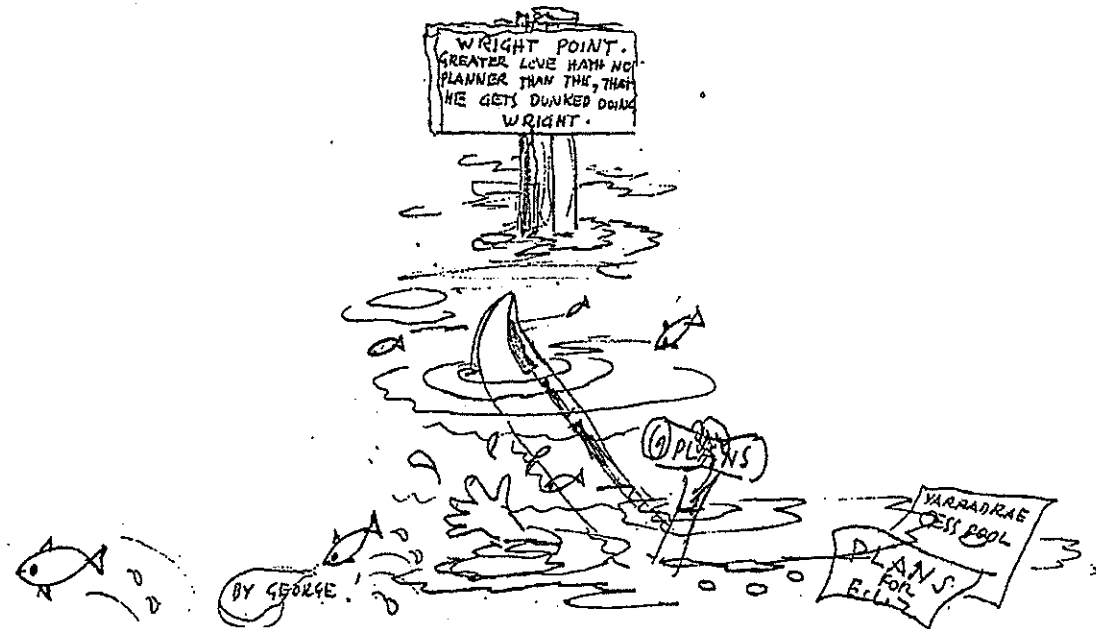
At last the penny dropped. Neil was making a point. He was demonstrating that we didn't understand the environment very well. We

needed to come to terms with the bush in its context, not in our worldly view. Nature did not organise itself in the rigid lines of man-modified landscapes and the blurred, out-of-focus images that he was showing created impressions that he as an artist needed to capture to get the big picture...only after that could he start to look at the detail.

Gradually, the pictures he showed started to be focused and the details emerged. The final photograph was crystal clear. His message was in the delivery as much as in the subject matter.

Not only did he impart the information he wanted to pass on, he did it in a manner that was his own. It was full of mischievous intent with a love of his fellow man and a sense of fun. The subject matter was serious, important and worthy of our concentration. We left wiser and touched by a man who could draw pictures with his bush, with his words, with his actions or with his mind.

GEORGE WRIGHT



SOME RECENT MEMORIES OF NEIL DOUGLAS

For some years Neil was artist in residence at the Horsham Art Gallery where he was highly regarded because of the success of his exhibitions and his generosity to the gallery.

In 1991 I visited Neil at the gallery director's home (where he was then living) and he drove me along one of his favourite tracks in the Little Desert. We stopped for a cup of tea, brewed right in the middle of the track! My job was to open gates and engage and disengage the free-wheeling hubs on the front wheels of the Nissan whenever required.

On asking whether he would like to visit us at the Bend of Islands he declined, saying that he would never do so because of the painful memories that would be invoked. He was about 80 years old at the time and appeared in fine form.

In 2001 I attended the Project Hindmarsh Biolink tree planting week-end which was the completion (after four or five years) of the vegetation corridor linking the Big and Little Deserts. One lunchtime we had a visitor that I first sighted from behind and did not recognise. It was a tall, stooped figure with long, white hair and bare feet. He proceeded slowly, supported by a woman and a man. It was Neil, accompanied by Pauline and George McCracken of the West Wimmera Health Service.

The next day I visited him at his home in Nhill. It was a very nice transportable two-roomed flat, located on Pauline and George's land and surrounded by garden beds with flowers in bloom. He was then about 90. Neil was fully dressed but lying on the bed; this time I had to make the tea. I raised the question of visiting the Bend of Islands again and this time he said that he would like to. From his bed he reached over to a file and extracted a paper from it, asking me if I would deliver it to our historian, Mick Woiwod. It was a short letter, dated in 1971, from the Healesville Shire Council, upholding Neil's objection to Council's plan for development of the Bend of Islands area - presumably a subdivision. Thus the foundations had been laid for the protection of the area which we now enjoy.

The McCrackens were sympathetic to the ideas of bringing Neil to visit us and eventually, after some months a date was selected for a visit to Café Benders. The visit would have entailed an overnight stop in Ballarat for quite a frail man. Unfortunately, Neil was not up to it and the visit never took place.

In 1997, when Neil was 86, he was living in his caravan at Venus Bay. He was still driving the Nissan. This time the visitors were Mick, Alan, Carol and me; of course he made us all a cup of tea.

NORM LINTON-SMITH

BICA Newsletter March 2004

THOUGHTS FROM PETER

Peter first met Neil when he went to Murrumbidgee to commission John Percival to make for him a set of cups and saucers.

Later he visited Neil at Bayswater with John Reed from Heide. Neil lived here in a tiny mud brick cottage surrounded by his "drought garden", landscaped with lots of rocks. The site was later bulldozed as industry took over.

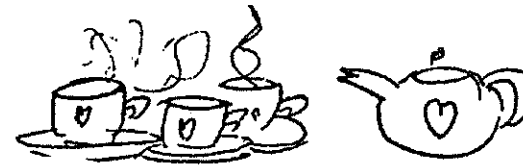
In 1966 Peter and family were living in East Melbourne when he drove to Research to pick up Neil and come up to the Bend of Islands. Neil had a tent on his block of land. Peter found his block; it had a burnt-out house surrounded by a garden and a magnificent view of the city. Eventually he built a weekend.

When they were there they would hold Saturday breakfasts, a bit like Café Benders but they called them "champagne breakfasts"- a bit of sophistication - and people would drop in. Randall Champion came. He was involved in setting up the Co-op.

Over the years Peter remembers many arguments with Neil including a time when he had a head-on car crash just outside Neil's with Bob English in his Peugeot. Abbie calmed things down with a cuppa tea.

Peter last saw Neil this year at the opening of his exhibition at Heide where Neil was in a wheelchair and very frail. Peter gave him a big hug and said thankyou for all you have done.

PETER BURNS



NEIL REMEMBERED BY MICK...

Most everyone out here in the Bend of Islands has his or her good story about Neil Douglas and anything I might do in that direction wouldn't add much to our understanding of the man. Suffice to say he was a remarkable character - our own remarkable character! And that's something we ought always remember! The Bend of Islands wouldn't be what it is today without his input. The thing about Neil is that he had vision! Nothing unusual about that you might say; we all have our dreams but mostly they remain as such. Neil ran with his!

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hands of fellow dreamers eager to live in it with minimal impact upon it. Neil was no purist! Purists don't win the big ones. Instead, it had always to be a balancing act about hearts and minds; aware that he need stand somewhere left of centre to win the bureaucrats over to something as radical as 'nature conservation' in the 1970s.

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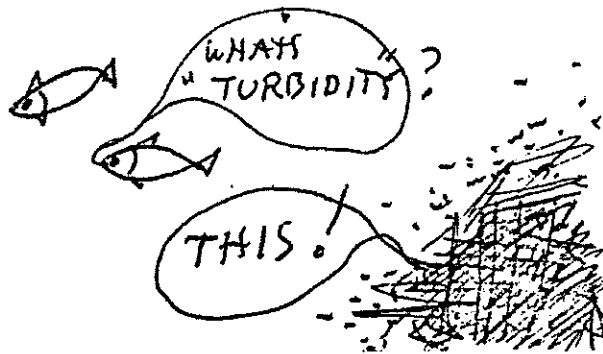
White man got no dreaming,
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White man he go different.
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...AND JANET

As a family we were not content living in the suburbs. We loved getting out into the bush, learning about and being part of the natural environment. So we looked around. What about the Bend of Islands? An advertisement in the National Trust Newsletter brought us to visit Neil Douglas. A cup of tea all round and we were soon under his spell. His enormous enthusiasm, his humour, his passion for the beauty and complexities of the bush soon had us inspired to stay. Over the following years, and many cups of tea Neil taught us to better understand and love our wild and 'scraggy' bush. In fact so much so that I along with others have a strong commitment to making his vision of Residential Conservation and Environmental Living work. Thank you Neil. We as a community are still learning about the bush, still talking to the planners, still pulling out weeds, but we watch the choughs and the kangaroos and delight in the orchids each spring. We are privileged to live in such a beautiful place and will always be grateful for your vision and leadership.

JANET MATTISKE



OUR BAREFOOT ARTIST

Clive Crouch

Clive wrote this for the Wimmera Mail-Times shortly after Neil's death. He has given us permission to print it in our Newsletter. Sometime after this was written Neils ashes were scattered in he Little Desert during a private ceremony.

Our 'local' artist, Neil Douglas, died peacefully ant the Iona Digby Harris Nursing Home in Nhill during the evening of Saturday 25 October, 2003, at the age of 92.

Neil was conceived in New Zealand, born at sea en-route to Australia and spent the rest of his long life in this country. From an early age, he had a keen interest in nature and the Australian bush. At around the age of six he did his first painting - of a gum tree.

For a time he went to a private school in Adelaide and, for those us who knew him in later life, it hard to imagine him dressed in a smart school uniform, complete with shiny black shoes!

Later on, the family moved to Porepunkah in Victoria's tobacco-growing region. Here Neil went to the local state school and, to his amazement and great delight, most of the kids went to school in bare feet. For him it started a trend that stayed with him for pretty much the rest of his life.

His love of art, coupled with his natural talent, brought Neil into contact with some of the influential artists in the pre-Second World War era and, during that period, Neil was befriended by art patrons John and Sunday Reed at Heidelberg. At Sunday's request, Neil established a six-acre garden for her and John on their property 'Heide'.

While living and working at Heide. Neil rubbed shoulders with now-renowned artists Albert Tucker and Sidney Nolan - in fact Nolan painted all but one of his famous Ned Kelly series of paintings at Heide.

When the war broke out Neil enlisted and spent some of this time as a camouflage artist and he told me some very interesting and amusing tales of his life in the army, including that of one of his marriages that lasted for only two weeks!

After the war, Neil moved to Eltham and, in time, began working as a potter for Arthur Merrick Boyd, working with John Perceval and Merrick's son, Arthur, both of whom became very famous painters. 'AMB' pottery, as it is now known, has become highly-prized by collectors and, earlier this year, one of Neil's pieces sold at auction for over \$5000.

At Eltham Neil married Vivien and they had three sons, Lyndon, Fabian and Rohan. Vivien was a very talented woman who qualified as an engineer at university but, as time went by, they parted.

Eventually Arthur Boyd, John Perceval and Neil Douglas began to gain recognition for their art works and they eventually left the AMB studio and went their separate ways to further their own careers as artists.

While Boyd's and Perceval's paintings were in the expressionist, modern or abstract styles Neil deliberately chose to paint Australian landscapes for two reasons; because he really 'saw' and understood Australia's unique landscapes and because he wanted to show others, through his paintings, how wonderful the bush is and to encourage them to appreciate and preserve it.

His love of the Australian bush and his desire to save it saw Neil become involved in conservation and the controversy over plans to bulldoze the Little Desert and turn it into farmland really got Neil fired up. David Johnson, the Channel 7 newsreader, visited the Little Desert in 1969 to do a news report on the controversy and brought Neil along to add flavour to his report. On seeing the desert for the first time, Neil exclaimed "But there's nothing here". Then, as his eyes left the far horizon and began to focus on the wildflowers at his feet, he suddenly realised how wonderfully complex and beautiful the Little Desert was and he was hooked on it from that moment on.

So much so that as soon as he got back to Melbourne he got in his car and drove straight back to Nhill. On arrival he telephoned local naturalist Clive Crouch and asked him to guide him around the Little Desert. When he saw the grass-trees growing on the heath plain near Uthmeyer's Hut he said "this is where I will camp and the hut will be my studio". While there, over the next six weeks, Neil painted many masterpieces, all of which were quickly snapped up by enthusiastic art lovers in Melbourne.

Around this time Neil's interest in conservation began to blossom and he was instrumental in setting up the Environmental Living Zone at Kangaroo Ground east of Melbourne. With his partner Abbie Heathcote (herself a talented artist) they built an extraordinary mud brick 'mansion' with a fabulous garden.

In recognition of his contribution to society, Neil was awarded an MBE 'for his service to art and conservation'.

He made several trips back to the Little Desert, to the Big Desert, Sunset Country, Mount Arapiles and the Grampians. After many years, Neil and Abbie went their separate ways and the mud brick house at Kangaroo Ground was sold. Neil then came to Nhill (in 1986) and visited long-time friends Clive and Jan Crouch. It took him a few days to sort himself out after the sale of his house but one morning he said "I'm all right now; I'll go and do a painting". He travelled out into the Little Desert and produced a masterpiece, 'Black Jack's Track'. Neil travelled around the desert and this was probably the most productive period of his life. During a five month period he produced 82 paintings, all of extraordinary quality. Through Clive's constant nagging, Neil finally agreed to have an exhibition of his paintings in Nhill and, through the

excellent work of the Nhill Arts Council and the Nhill branch of the Save the Children Fund, the exhibition was set up in the Nhill Memorial Theatre and ran for ten days over the Easter period in 1987. It was an outstanding success and for Neil it was the most successful exhibition he ever had. He fell in love with Nhill - the town, the people, the nearby bush and for the next twelve years he lived, on and off, with Clive and Jan Crouch, interspersed with stays with Kirby and Karen Hallmark of Glendinning and John and Anne Uebergang at Natimuk.

Soon after his Nhill exhibition, the Horsham Art Gallery requested Neil to hold an exhibition there. So over the next twelve months Neil produced another magnificent series of paintings at locations around the Wimmera. That was another outstanding success, breaking all previous records for both sales and attendance. This was followed by exhibitions in Hamilton, Sale, Healesville, Dandenong and then back to Horsham and Hamilton again. For Clive and Jan almost every minute of their spare time during this period was spent keeping Neil to deadlines, cataloguing his works, arranging to have them framed, liaising with the various galleries and making innumerable cups of tea for Neil!

Although by this time he was well into his eighties, Neil still had boundless energy and ran everywhere. When visiting his picture framer friend, Clive Leith, in Horsham one day Neil decided to run around the corner to get some cake for afternoon tea. Unfortunately he slipped on the wet footpath and damaged his hip severely. Before long he had to have an artificial hip fitted. This gave him better mobility for a few years but, as time went by, he had to have another hip replacement and he never really recovered from this operation. Through the kindness of his good friend, George Curkpatrick, Neil moved into a granny-flat on George's block but all too soon Neil needed home help so meals and wheels and a visiting nurse provided such assistance. Finally he moved into Iona Digby Harris Nursing home and, in Neil's words, "The staff there are fantastic".

In July, his long-time friend and supporter Elizabeth Arthur (owner of the Elizabeth Arthur Fine Art Gallery in Hamilton) organised a retrospective exhibition of Neil's work at Heide Gallery in Melbourne. Although frail by this time he was transported to the exhibition where he was delighted to be at Heide and took great delight in seeing the garden that he had created some sixty years earlier. Neil was really 'fired up' on the way home, filled with many memories of Heide and of the times he spent there with the Reeds, Tucker and many of Melbourne's intellectuals, discussing art and philosophy around the open fire in the sitting room.

Sadly this was to be Neil's last trip away from Nhill and over the next few months he became increasingly frail, finally passing away. On several occasions he told Clive that, when he died he wanted to be buried under a gum tree in the Little Desert. As this was not possible he asked for his ashes to be scattered in the Desert, with no fanfare, pomp or ceremony.

KOOKABURRA TALES

The Mildenhall Family



For the past five months an adolescent male kookaburra has taken its role of helping to defend his family's territory at 209 Catani very seriously. Admittedly over the months the attacks have slowed down and Kate's boyfriend commented recently "You don't even flinch anymore." Yes, this is the story of how we learnt to live with our little aggressor.

In September the attacks, which in our previous eleven years we'd never experienced, would start at sunrise and, we soon learnt, continue throughout the day until dark. He'd start at the West end of the house with a single torpedo into our bedroom window. In the early days this would leave one or other or both of us hanging from the ceiling. He'd follow up with a bang, bang, bang, bang on the bathroom window and then if we were lucky come back to us attacking from the North. At first he only dive-bombed upstairs windows but soon the whole house became the enemy. We'd watch him sometimes perched in the tree looking weary but, we imagined, feeling victorious on account of his successful mission. Our house had not budged one centimetre. At that stage we and visitors still flinched big time at each attack.

By late October we were a little demented, especially Maggie, who was doing exams and on many occasions was heard to yell from her bed about the terrible things she would do to that bird if she could lay her hands on it! We were a little dispirited after consulting the bird book and discovered that auxiliary males can take their territory-defending role seriously from August until April! Coincidentally he broke a large upstairs window and also around November injured himself and was leaving bloody streaks everywhere. It was depressing and we were worried about the bird. Its beak seemed blunted and he looked battle weary. We decided to catch him. Our plan of attack was to have him checked out by a vet and then take him to Trish's aviary. Peter bought a big fish landing net and attached an extension handle. He spent the good part of a weekend mounting Monty Python type attacks, which left him cursing and the bird attacking. Finally we realised we had to get him on the rebound. By this stage we knew his attack courses and so the plan went into operation.

Success. But woe; at the speed with which he hit the net he became well and truly tangled and very unhappy. We felt like monsters as we cut away the new salmon net holding onto him and he fought this time for his freedom. The girls were in tears and

Peter was thinking other things that can't be mentioned in this publication. We got him into a box and Kate crooned to him on her knee in the car.

Almost at Warrandyte, she said more than a little distressed, "I think he's dead!" We'd rung the vet so she was expecting us. On request she calmed our consciences announcing that indeed he was still alive. She said she'd check him out and be in contact.

That night was horribly quiet! The next day Kate went home and Peter and I went off to walk in the Prom. Poor Maggie was left with the fallout. It had taken the kookaburra twenty-four hours to shut his beak and get over the capture! Otherwise he was unhurt. Without special permission the vet could not release him anywhere other than within a short distance of his capture site. She suggested we stick cut-outs of hawks on our windows and mirrors in trees and that if we couldn't handle any further attacks we could apply to have him caught again. We'd been home from the Prom for five minutes before we were welcomed. We smiled. He's back then. The capture was so traumatic it was a relief he was okay, exams were over and hey here we are in February and we don't even flinch anymore!

COMMUNITY COMMUNICATION

Peter Gurney

Over the years a really important component of our community has been the CFA ERS (Emergency Reporting Service). As a service specially for our community the ERS was used to provide a range of responses for members of our community, not just the reporting of fires. This meant that as a community we could support each other in a range of emergencies or stressful situations using an efficient local community staffed (but CFA provided and funded) communications system. In November 2003 the CFA hierarchy discontinued the ERS and replaced it with a pager based communications system for each and every firefighter. This is an efficient means of communication, but there is no longer a CFA provided telephone communications system for other community support needs; and there is no longer a fire siren linked to the communications system.

Because a number of people have expressed concerns about the demise of the ERS it was decided at the BICA general meeting in February to hold a meeting to discuss whether the Bend of Islands community wants to have a community support communications system.

There will therefore be a meeting on this issue at the fire shed on Saturday 17th April in conjunction with the monthly Café Benders. Everyone interested in this issue is invited to attend and to take part. The aims of the meeting are to find out if a community based support communications system is possible, how it might operate, how it might be funded and what community support there would be for such a system

DRY AS DUST

Peter Gurney

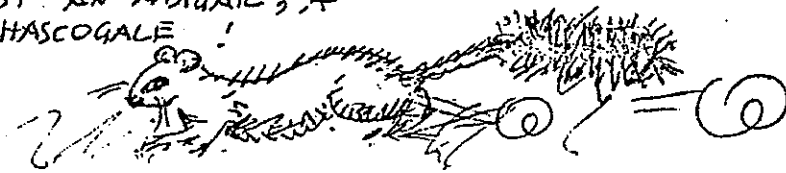
If you live close by one of our dirt roads dust is a real problem, not just through the summer but throughout the year. After years of observation here are a few facts that I have discovered; most of which are patently obvious but some people seem to be unaware of them.

1. The faster a vehicle travels the more dust it raises. A vehicle travelling at around 20kph or less when passing houses raises very little dust.
2. The larger the vehicle the more dust it sucks into the air. Larger vehicles with square rear ends (station wagons, panel vans, 4WD, people movers, vans and trucks) put more dust in the air than smaller cars and therefore should travel even slower when passing houses.
3. There is nearly always a breeze or some slight breeze and dust blows with the wind. Drivers need to be aware in which direction the dust is blowing behind them and make concessions for dwellings on the down wind side of the road.
4. Roads become corrugated and the wheel tracks more worn down at places where vehicles travel faster or accelerate up hills. By driving slowly and gently there will be less road surface corrugations and the wheel tracks will not erode so markedly. This will reduce potential damage to vehicles and give drivers more control over their vehicles. (Just think, how many hundreds of tonnes of soil must be removed from our roads each year to create the deep, corrugated wheel tracks so characteristic of our dirt roads towards the end of summer?). It will also reduce the amount of dust coating roadside plants and roadside homes.

If we all drive just a little more slowly, considerately and carefully on ELZ roads (dirt and bitumen) we will raise less dust, reduce the number of animals and birds killed, and lower the potential for accidents. Also, perhaps Nillumbik Council will not need to continue the proliferation of traffic signs and road markings which gradually add to the urbanisation of our bush land home.

Having written this I want to record my thanks to the many people who drive very considerately past our home.

NOT AN ABIGAIL, A
PHASCOGALE!



STUFFED TOY FOUND ON 'A' TRACK!

Debra White

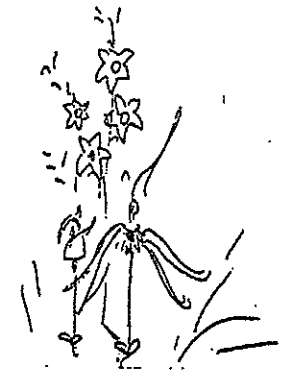


Some months ago, when coming home late at night from work, I saw on the track outside our house what I thought was a stuffed toy animal. I stopped to pick it up only to realise that it was a sitting and living koala. I was so excited, for in the 12 years of living on the Co-op I have heard several of them but never seen one, especially so close to the house. I left the car lights on so I could get a good look at him and to check out his condition. I expected him to flee but to my delight he stayed put. That made me wonder if he might be injured. He had big old looking protruding teeth, his fur was a bit patchy and he was quite verbal. We sat together for a while with him making his growling noises and we talked whilst I patted his wet back. I wondered why his back was so wet as there had not been any rain that night. He was quite content for me to pat and talk to him until he got up and moved to a nearby tree where he climbed to my eye level, stopped, growled a bit more, then slowly disappeared. My excitement was palpable and I couldn't tell Kerry quickly enough. It thrilled me to know that they are about especially when I get a visit.

Just recently, again late at night, I was again excited by the sight of a totally white kangaroo on Dead Chicken Hill. What's that all about?

JUST OUT

The pocket-sized guide to the orchids of the Round the Bend Conservation Co-operative has been reprinted with the addition of an index. This is a full colour guide for the 50 species that have been identified of the Co-op. It is available now for \$10 from Neil Harvey or the Bonnys. There is a limited print run.





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RECENT IMPORTS

Congratulations to Kathy and Colin on the safe arrival of 9 lb 9 oz Guthrie Tate, brother for Ryan and Jethro.

Also welcome to new Henley Rd residents and BICA members Greg and Janet Phillips and family.

NEXT EVENTS

May 8th Tour de Bend

May 30th BICA General Meeting

June 6th World Environment Day

July 10th Trivia Night

BIRD NOTES

Frank Pierce

The following events can be reported since last November.

Lyrebirds- 7 further reports, all from 26/0204 to 6/0304. Heard 3 times and seen once near upper Catani. Seen twice near the end of Gongflers and heard at end of C Track on the Coop. Refer to BICA website (<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~bica/lyrebirds.html>).

Powerful Owls-These have been heard on an irregular basis over the period in the ELZ.

Other interesting sightings include two species not known to be previously recorded in the ELZ. A Song Thrush was seen just north of the Coop in November 03, and a flock of 10 Swift Parrots was seen flying over C Track in early March 04.

Pink Robin, Spotted Quail-thrush and White-throated Nightjar have been recorded as well as most of the other usual summer migrants. A notable absentee this summer has been the Rufous Fantail. There has also been a dramatic fall in the number of Eastern Yellow Robins, at least on the Coop.

Could you please record the details of any unusual sightings you make and pass them on to Frank Pierce (97120237) or Steve Craig (97120029), especially Lyrebirds and Powerful Owls.

All are welcome to join us on the bird walks on the second Sunday of each month. Times are as per the BICA Calendar.

Tour de Bend May 8
General Meeting May 30
World Environment Day June 6
Trivia Night July 10

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