

Scholar and gentleman

Peter Ferguson Brownell, OAM
Botanist
Born: May 16, 1922; Adelaide
Died: July 9, 2002; Townsville

DR Peter Brownell was a pioneering research scientist, and mentor and popular colleague of agricultural science students studying botany at the University of Adelaide in the 1950s and 1960s. He epitomised the expression "a gentleman and a scholar".

Known affectionately as "Umm" by his colleagues, Peter was the second son of Dr Herbert Percival Brownell and Mollie Brownell. His studies at Roseworthy Agricultural College began in 1941, but were interrupted by World War II, during which he served in Bomber Command in the UK.

On returning to Adelaide, Peter completed his Roseworthy Diploma of Agriculture (RDA) in 1947 and then a BAgSc in 1951. He worked as a soil conservation officer in the Department of Agriculture, before completing his Honours degree and PhD at the University of Adelaide. He gained post-doctoral experience at the Waite Agricultural Institute and at the University of Adelaide between 1959-1966. He was awarded a DSc in 1994.

In 1967, Peter transferred to the University College of Townsville (later James Cook University), as the first lecturer in



plant physiology, and then Associate Professor in the Department of Tropical Biology. Upon retirement in 1987, he was appointed Adjunct Associate Professor.

Peter made a major contribution to science. He was the first person in the world to demonstrate that sodium was an essential nutrient for some plants. This was spectacularly true for the Australian saltbush, *Atriplex vesicaria*. His pioneering research was conducted within the Botany

Department of the University of Adelaide and in a glasshouse on top of the Geology building, where incoming air had to be filtered to remove salt from the wind-borne sea spray.

Many years later, a novel photosynthesis pathway was identified in what have become known as C4 plants. Peter immediately realised that his plants which responded to this sodium belonged to this group of plants.

His later research concentrated on investigating the metabolism and physiology of C4 plants in an effort to discern the role of sodium in these plants. In 1994, Peter was awarded the Sir Joseph Verco Medal by the Royal Society of South Australia for his contribution to science.

He was patron of the James Cook University Rugby Club and patron of Townsville District Rugby Union; deputy chairman of the University's Hall of Residence board and life member of University Hall. He also gave long and distinguished service to Legacy in Townsville.

In 1998, he was awarded an OAM for his contributions in the field of plant physiology, education and for services to the Townsville community.

□ A commemorative gathering will be held at Urrbrae House, Waite Campus, University of Adelaide, on Tuesday, at 2.30pm. For further details, ring Jo Orr (8575 5035) or Max Tate (8303 7227).

READER CONTRIBUTIONS

Readers are invited to contribute obituaries. These should include dates of birth and death, and a photograph. Contributions must also include the author's telephone contact details.

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