Brian Cameron McLay 30 July 2025

First I want to thank North Porirua Baptist community for allowing us to use the church today. Whitby is not quite our home, but it is almost. Our family first came to Porirua in 1973 and it is important for us to celebrate Dad's life here, amongst our hills and so close to our beautiful inlet. I am so grateful also to the wonderful staff at Bupa just down the road who cared for him in the last two days. It is a great comfort to have got him as close to home as we could.

On behalf of my family, I thank you for coming to celebrate Dad's life with us. My father appreciated a good funeral because they gave him a chance to honour the contributions of others, so thank you for joining us to celebrate his. I'd like to acknowledge the presence here of many who have supported us over the last eight weeks, which have not been quite the best.

I would like to acknowledge our mother, Judith. They celebrated 60 years of marriage in May. If the last eight weeks were hard for us, they were almost impossible for her. Love has many forms, but countless hours sitting and waiting for doctors, or endless trips on the shuttle from Kenepuru to Newtown is one of them. I also know that Dad’s story is in part also her story, and she lived much of what I describe. Dad’s commitment to work and the community were not costless, especially for her.

If the last eight weeks were hard for us how horrible they must have been for my father. At the time he would have most wanted to have spoken clearly about his life, he was largely unable to. What I want to do now is perhaps to tell you some of the things that he would have liked to have said had he could have. I apologise if this might take longer than normal, but Brian Cameron McLay did a lot of things he had every right to be proud of.

Dad was born in a very different world on the 22nd of August 1940. His parents were William McLay and Annie Cameron. He grew up with his siblings Ruth, Dave – who were quite a bit older – John, and Rosemary in working-class Addington, 33 McCauley Street. His father was a signalman on the railway. Dad was a great fan of Janet Frame’s To the Is-land and its depiction of working class life in the South Island, especially the part where Frame describes being told to be quiet because “father was sleeping”.

Dad went to Addington primary school where two of his grandchildren many years later also went. He then went to Christchurch West, literally on the wrong side of the railway tracks. He wasn't the only one in his school to make a mark, and he was proud of the varying achievements of his classmates, be they sporting or academic, always had a soft spot for the peace campaigner and New Zealand radical Owen Wilkes. Dad was clever but I think Dad staying in school was a sacrifice for the whole family.

Dad played for the 1st 15 and played cricket with a future test cricketer. He watched the injury 1956 Springbok test, and he cycled to Lancaster Park after Christmas lunch to watch the Plunkett shield. While Dad watched the rugby (and I remember well watching with him, Wayne Smith break the Wellington line and hearts from the old Millard stand in that epic shield game), his real love was always cricket, and in later years he and I must have spent hundreds of hours at the basin reserve – some of our best moments were spent with Richard Hadlee and Martin Crowe.

When he finished school, Brian joined the Christchurch Lands and Deeds office where he worked as an entry-level clerk. Amongst his papers is his first contract with the public service (One service, one career). His work was as basic as it perhaps got, but he was looking to the future. In an application, he wrote to become an Assistant Law Registrar

During the last three years, I have had experience of practically all the work of the office. This includes about six months as requisitions and registration clerk. I have also spent the last six months as the section of officer of the Companies Section. … I am a member of the Canterbury branch of the New Zealand Institute of Public Administration for whom I have participated in various debates… Last May I attended the Fourth Junior Officers Course held in Wellington … I have been chosen as the Chairman of the Junior group to meet the Royal Commission of Inquiry on State Services

Most importantly during those years, Dad was also studying law at Canterbury University – classes before work, classes at lunchtime, classes after work, and study in the evenings. In 1965 before he had quite finished Dad was offered a promotion to be District Land Registrar in Gisborne. Amongst his papers is a folio of international law notes written in different handwriting, an early example of online education.

He remained throughout his life the proudest of Canterbury graduates. He would be so proud that the Canterbury Dean is here today – thanks Petra.

For him, Canterbury opened up a completely new world. Dad never forgot the power of education. When he congratulated me after my own inaugural lecture he simply said “Your grandparents would never have imagined”. I know he was just as proud of my brothers’ achievements and now those of his grandchildren – he told the doctors repeatedly over the last eight weeks. I often tell my colleagues at the University that what we do counts because we change lives, and I know that because it changed my Dad's life.

The other thing that changed his life was when he met our mother while studying in the old Christchurch library and they were married in May 1964.

For my parents who had lived in Christchurch and in Timaru, Gisborne was a revelation of a different New Zealand. Dad's daily job became dealings with Māori land, and culture very different from his own. During that time in Gisborne, Simon was born. Not as importantly but importantly still, Dad joined the local JC chapter and began a lifetime of community involvement. Dad was transferred to Napier.

We lived in Napier from 1967 to 1973, me coming along in 1969 and Michael in 1971. We lived in Primari. Dad was very involved with Jaycees in Napier and some of his fondest memories were the great fundraising campaigns the Napier Jaycees ran, the first for the cardiac unit at Napier hospital when a group of them head on the extraordinary idea I invited Christian Barnard, the world-famous heart transplant surgeon, or inviting Princess Alexandra to come to assist the fundraising for private hospital in Napier. In Napier he honed his talent for public speaking and when JC competitions in oratory and debating. The passage Tom will read from Erewhon started a speech in which Dad accused his own Canterbury of condemning Samuel Butler when he lived with them, only to claim once he had become famous – Dad believed to his core that people should just be allowed to get on with their lives and make their contributions – it wasn’t for us to judge.

He also told me that he had been offered partnerships in various Napier law firms, and also potentially a safe labour seat. But for Dad, it was always “one service, one career”.

Brian loved the intricacies of the land transfer system. Among the things he could not throw out were his old precedents that he developed in the instructions he drew up for the staff who worked with him. And woe betide in later life the real estate that told him not to worry too much about it, said about a property on the CT.

But someone in Wellington must have been watching Dad for other things: at only 34, he was appointed as registrar of companies, later becoming an Assistant Secretary of Justice for Commercial Affairs. He didn’t know it, but he was walking into a firestorm of major investment company collapses: JBL (1972), Cornish (1974), Circuit (1974), Perpetual Trustees ( neither perpetual nor trustees, as Dad would quip)( 1975), Gemco (1975) (I’m going to begin to skip) Security Bank (1976), Chateau Hotels (1977)…and the last and biggest the PSIS in 1979. The causes of the collapses were economic but also basic regulatory failure – NZ didn’t have any proper securities law at all. Dad couldn’t change the former, but could the latter. He spent much of the next few years advocating for an independent public-private regulator. When he first retired, he wrote a long memoir of this time. It is a study of how to do commercial law reform, and the respective roles of officials, ministers and the private sector. He loved working not just with public servants but with some of the very best accountants and lawyers in the country. For me, it is the dedication that says it all

“To the public service of my memory and to those private sector leaders particularly the accountants, who led me to think about the change that would best suit all sectors”.

A Securities Act, all be it imperfect was passed in 1978. But there was also quite often emergency legislation, and instructing of lawyers, sometimes very senior. Amongst his papers was a letter written to him when he left Commercial Affairs in 1979

“Looking back what really strikes me as important is, given the problems of the period and the previous problems of inertia on the parts of Governmental agencies, how quickly and widely the work of the Commercial Affairs Division came to be recognised and valued. I have no doubt that was due to your leadership”

ILM Richardson, Court of Appeal

In one famous collapse (at least to us), Dad was briefing the Prime Minister and something had to be fetched from out of the office. Prime Minister Muldoon was so worried the press would see Dad emerging from his office, he did the fetching himself. Brian the public servant had an interesting relationship with Muldoon, he understood that it was some of Muldoon’s policies that had contributed to the collapses, but also found the notoriously grumpy Prime Minister on occasions charming – when he had been sick the next time the PM saw him he said it was great he was back because he was needed – on another occasion, Jim McLay was at the same meeting as Dad, and Muldoon asked for McLay’s opinion – Jim began to speak, as he might, but Muldoon cut him off: “not you, the lawyer”.

Dad’s time in Commercial affairs was the most exciting and extraordinary of his professional career. It was also in 1977 when he had his first visit to cardiac care when a pulmonary embolism almost ended his life.

Dad was moved from Commercial Affairs to Deputy Secretary of Internal Affairs in 1979. Internal Affairs was as it is now a bit of an odd collection of stuff – but the eclectic nature of its functions really appealed to someone who wanted to make a difference in a lot of things.

* the Film Commission (this was just at the start when few people could have imagined the Lord of Rings. Although we did also go to at least one simply terrible film premiere),
* the Lotteries Board (he introduced Lotto to New Zealand, only to be vilely defamed in the House for corruption that didn’t happen – hell Dad wouldn’t even let us keep the tennis balls with Lotto on them he had brought back from Australia),
* the Historic Places Trust,
* The wildlife service (we got to visit lots of cool places, and had confiscated trout at Christmas times).
* He was also responsible for Rec and Sport in which capacity he helped organise and front the New Zealand Games which was a replacement for the boycotted Moscow Olympics.

He also loved that his title included “Deputy Clerk of the Writs”.

In all of these things, Dad made a big contribution, but his big job was rebuilding morale at the department, Michael Bassett wrote a history of the department and described it this way…

A 39-year-old lawyer Brian McLay, an expert in company law, was asked by the SSC to move across to be the Deputy Secretary for Internal Affairs. A large, likeable man with the gift of the gab and a talent for argument, Mclay did his best to restore the Department’s sense of purpose, but was never to be its permanent head.

I would like to mention three things in particular. Dad was asked to organise the Royal Tour in 1981. This meant travelling to London to literally meet the Queen. He travelled with Sir Patrick O’Day, knight of the royal Victorian order, “the Queen’s Personal order you know”. They stayed in the most fantastic hotels, the Peninsula Hotel in Browns in London – what the current Office of the Auditor General might make of this sensitive expenditure I cannot speculate. Dad had many stories of his time there, visiting the places that his aunts had used to refer to as “home”. In his very first visit to England, he got to tell the taxi driver to take him through the Palace gates (his parents would never have imagined). His one great regret, he was absent from the Palace the day that Lady Dianna Spencer visited.

The second was more long-lasting – Brian determined that he would make the most of the forthcoming 1990 celebrations (and no he was not responsible for Sesqui). His pet project was promoting a dictionary of national biographies. Dad was not a historian but he loved working with WH Oliver and Claudia Orange, and he was just the man to convince the Muldoon government to fund a Dictionary that recorded New Zealanders’ lives, he was so proud of those books, and proudest of the Te Reo volume even though he could not read a word, it was enough that other people could. I use these books all the time – they are now on Te Ara, and you should too. In Dad’s files there are also numerous nominations he made for others to be awarded Honours, he always believed people made a country and they should be remembered.

His other 1990 project was to build the new art gallery opposite parliament, which was scuppered by lawyers who lobbied for the building of the new High Court (Bassett is really good on this).

He was also an official in the review that led to the Constitution Act. He was particularly keen on retaining the ambiguity in what is now section 16 about the Governor General’s ability to refuse assent to Bills in “very rare, unimaginable cases”, he would say he won, but others I know claim differently. On other legal matters, I remember him once excitedly showing me the letter he had just got from the SG after the SG had lost the biggest case of our times, the Lands case about the principles of the Treaty – to say the Government lost the Lands case is to misunderstand.

Brian was headhunted to be the chief executive of the Local Government Association in 1989 until he retired in 1996. This had just been formed as a merger of the Counties and Municipals Association. It was a time of new dawn in Local Government. Dad’s first role was to salve the wounds and he contributed enormously to the local government reforms that followed. This was important work, he loved meeting councillors and mayors, and he travelled to various local government gatherings around the world. If I talk less about the LGA and local government, it is not because he didn’t put his heart and soul into it, absolutely he did. In my humble view, New Zealand would have been better off if various governments had seen the potential of local government that he did. The same was possibly true of the mayors he spent so much time with. But in his heart, Dad was a public servant (one service, one career). He was proud of his staff, and one of them wrote to me this morning “I was most fortunate to have the experience of working for your father for a couple of years in the late 80s. He was enthusiastic, professional, kind and generous. He was such a great mentor, boss and public servant.”

I could talk more about Jaycees and then Rotary of which Dad was an enthusiastic member, but his most important service was on the first Board of our College. Gear Point High School become Aotea College, with a Pataka as its emblem, and a whakataukī as its motto. His commitment to progressive education was very real. He just wanted kids to succeed. The Board hired the best principal in New Zealand, who hired the best staff – there were battles with the Ministry of Education over flooring and building that couldn’t be built or properly finished. But that was not really the point, the school was about a lot more in quite troubled times. In his 1981 end-of-year speech having dealt with the gym floor (concrete was unacceptable) and the campaign for the library, he said:

One other matter had the capacity to damage our school and that was the Springbok tour. Your board was unanimous in its support of our teachers in rejecting the Springbok tour. As my predecessor said, “in a school where the principles of Social justice and tolerance of minority cultures were of central concern, the Rugby Union’s actions were at total variance”…

Dad was very clear about the identity of the school:

The School’s multicultural character, and a basic requirement of all pupils that they respect each other as people has continued to be a major attraction about the school.

He then went to talk about the inclusive nature of the school and for the recently arrived Kampuchean refugees. He described his vision of education in a time of social uncertainty

The School has become a “home” for many children – a place of security in a way that their parents treated the places they lived as children as their homes. We particularly endorse the attitude that young people are to be counselled, advised and helped, and reject caning and other forms of corporal punishment as anachronisms belonging to the age of Victorians

In his retirement Dad worked hard to help get the money to build a sports pavilion for the college – it was over a decade since his last son had left, but the school needed a pavilion.

Dad retired in 1996 as his heart problems had become worse. I think he would have been surprised to have made it this far, from rather bleak predictions at the time – and indeed from time to time, there were big scares. When he had his big heart attack in late May – none of us, not least him, was surprised.

He wrote his memoir, but then wouldn’t publish it, or let me! He went on trips with Mum including their great OE in Europe where their happiest moments seemed to be meeting young people also doing their OE, and then to Asia or to Australia, and they travelled on the Ghann, he satisfied his boyhood wish to travel to Broom, Western Australia. He participated in Rotary and won a Paul Harris fellowship for his work at the College.

He worked for many years on the National Geographic Board and served on the board of Whitireia. He never did much of the consultancy he thought he would do – I suspect that he wouldn’t have been a great consultant anyway – he was always “one service, one career”, belonging to institutions was important to him, and he built stuff. Most importantly over the last 20 years he loved being Grandpa.

My brothers will give some personal recollections. But I would like to add a couple of my own. Brian did not have religious beliefs or not at least he ever told anyone about. But he believed in important things.

He thought his biggest job was to give back to the country and community that had given him so much. He succeeded.

He also believed intensely in doing your best and being part of a team. The only time he was ever truly angry at me was when he thought I had let my primary school cricket team down by not turning up for a game after I had got back from a trip earlier than expected.

His love was the love of always turning up. You only had to give my parents a sniff of some event or sports game, or whatever that might possibly need support, and they would be there. Despite his incredibly busy work schedule I cannot remember him ever missing a soccer game or a cricket match of mine, and the same was true of Tom's own soccer career and Sam’s very brief cricket career (there was one glorious day when Sam’s game was at the basin reserve). It was certainly true of Lizzie’s dancing, and he was really upset to hear when he was in hospital that Lizzie had broken her leg. I know he was also just as proud of all his other grandchildren. Please always know that Grandpa wants you to do as well as you can in whatever you can – that is all he ever asked of you.

But supporting school children’s sports is not for the faint-hearted in Wellington’s climate. For many years Dad and Mum attended the November KNS school sports at Ben Burn Park. The weather was often less than ideal – quite often they were the only adults there (apart from the teachers who couldn’t escape, even though our kids weren’t winning anything). I know this because I would sometimes drive past so as not to be seen.

On that awful night in May at about 2 am my mother and I were in Dad’s cardiac room wondering if we should stay or go home to sleep. Mum told me the story that once a very young Tom turned to them one foul sports day, saw how miserable they were and told them to go ‘ome. Mum told me this had become coda for them when they had enough of some event or another, and that they had fulfilled their obligation, and they could have a well-earned rest.

So, Dad, it is time to go ‘ome, God’s speed, you did good, we got this.