



Brian Ochs

10 March 1935 – 20 January 2015

Tributes and Memories from Friends and Colleagues

Compiled for the celebration of Brian's life
on 18 March 2015



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Published tributes

PEARSON EDUCATION WEBSITE

We are very saddened by the news that our dear friend and colleague Brian Abbs passed away this week while on holiday with his sister in law.

Brian was a giant of the ELT industry and a true pioneer in materials writing. Along with his writing partner, Ingrid Freebairn, Brian was responsible for the creation of a number of hugely popular and highly influential ELT titles over the last 40 years. Brian and Ingrid received a lifetime achievement award from the British Council Innovation Awards – the ELTons – in 2011 in recognition of their contribution to the lives of ELT teachers and learners all over the world through their writing.

Brian's publications include the Strategies series (1975), Discoveries (1986), Splash!, Blueprint (1989), Snapshot (1997) and Sky (2005). In recent years, Brian became a series consultant, passing on his invaluable expertise and advice to new writing teams on projects such as Brilliant! (2012) and Today! (2014).

Brian worked with hundreds of Pearson/Longman staff over the years, teaching us all a great deal about ELT, publishing, classroom pragmatics and life in general! Generous with his time, knowledge and friendship, a phone call from Brian was always a diversion from more mundane activities at work. Often confusing, always funny, frequently scandalous(!), Brian's calls were very welcome. We will remember him with huge fondness and pride at his achievements.

Pearson Education

IATEFL'S MAGAZINE 'VOICES'

"Hello dear heart, what IS happening in the world of ELT publishing? I mean what are we going to DO about it?"

It's Brian on the phone, passionate, committed, outraged and still, gloriously, outrageous. And so you abandon work for the next thirty minutes and find yourself talking, gossiping and marveling with one of the outsize characters of the ELT world. If it was anyone else, you'd be irritated by this interruption but you're not. Because. Well, because it's Brian.

Way back then when Brian was working as head of ELT at what was then Ealing Technical College in London, he was a passionate advocate of education for all and a firm believer in social justice and equality. And then, in one of the smartest moves he ever made, he gave a job to a teacher called Ingrid Freebairn, and a true and enduring writing partnership was born.

Their writing starting just at the moment when the world of applied linguistics exploded with an interest in the way we use language – the rules of use without which 'the rules of grammar are meaningless' in Dell Hymes' often quoted remark. This was the age of notional syllabuses, language functions and a heady release from the rigid 4-line structural dialogue. Brian and Ingrid responded to this with language courses which depicted the lives of real people, not just ciphers; which included women in ordinary working roles; which dared to address issues of social inequality and realities such as marriage breakup mixed in with the fun and laughter. And all of this done with language which sounded like real language, not just grammar drills. *Strategies, Discoveries, Blueprint, Snapshot, Sky*. Courses for adults, courses for kids and teens. It seemed there was no stopping them. And when they went out into the world and told the profession what they had done, people saw and marveled, especially at Brian, a showman of his time.

It would be impossible to count the literally millions of students all over the world who learnt English with Brian and Ingrid's books.

And through it all, Brian and his devoted companion Evelyn, spent their time enjoying the world they lived in and trying, with passion, to make it a better one. Beneath that oversize engagement there was a generosity of spirit reflected in the material he wrote and the way he approached others and the world around him, that was a wonder to behold.

No more of those phone calls, now. Like everyone else on his calling list, my life is just a little bit emptier.

Jeremy Harmer

Personal tributes

Working, partying and arguing with Brian...

Brian gave great support to classroom teachers. I remember in the early 70s trialling some of the Strategies materials in a Stage 2 class and having really interesting chats with Brian afterwards. At the same time, he had great respect for academics whom he looked to to provide insight and intellectual rigour to his ideas. They were invited over to give seminars. David Wilkins from Reading University, Chris Candlin and others – this was how we first heard about Notional and Communicative Syllabuses. But Brian was very quick to spot the empty pretensions of other academics. These he would send up mercilessly with his wicked humour. I think EFL staff at Ealing were supported and encouraged to develop in their own different directions while he was Head of Division. Very loyal – he would both defend and sing the praises of his staff. Also, adept at fighting the EFL Division's corner inside the College. There was a lot of work but a lot of laughter too.

Great parties were organised. End-of-term or Christmas parties were noisier, bigger, and boozier than anyone. Brian would organise a party whenever he thought people needed a lift or just when things were getting dull. Once, he organised a picnic in Kew Gardens – and there were massive, traditional wicker hampers packed with goodies. When it poured with rain, we all went back to his house in Palewell Park and had the picnic indoors. It went on for many hours.

There were also parties and impromptu events for students. The Russians went to the London Apprentice and had a few too many. The Italian teachers had their party at Burlington and Paola wowed us all in her red dress. There must be students and teachers all over the world with memories of these parties.

Brian loved an argument, preferably a noisy one. He would deliberately pick an argument with people – sometimes to see if they could defend their views or sometimes just because they were getting on his nerves. And he loved a full-blown stand-up row because of the theatricality of it. Afterwards, he'd enjoy talking about it as if it had been a scene in a play. And the year that someone stole his Christmas tree, when tears were shed and offices and corridors were searched, was pure theatre.

He loved to gossip. He was serious about his work but hated people taking things too seriously or being pompous. He would send people up and take the piss of everyone as and when he felt like it. None of us were spared – you had to have a thick skin to be around Brian sometimes. Of course, he would later often admit he'd gone too far – but expected everyone to see the funny side.

Contrary, contradictory, but never, ever dull.

Sue Axbey

I have a memory, possibly under the heading 'Once upon a time' that illustrates caring and competence.

Returning from working as a nurse in the RAF, for his national service, Brian came to see me in Cambridge. Unfortunately I was in bed with measles, not at all well. Brian immediately assessed the situation and went to run a bath; removed me from bed to the bath and bathed me. He found a clean night dress and sheets, clever guy, made the bed and put me back to bed. Brought me a cup of tea, and left.

One does not forget such an experience.

Elizabeth Bryan

Like many others, I was very shocked and upset to hear of Brian's death. Italy was a launching pad for *Strategies* and later series and we often worked together at big launches in Bologna and elsewhere. Brian was always dedicated to putting on a great show for teachers. I remember Brian was in Milan for the launch of *Developing Strategies*. We had set up the venue and had some time to spare before the teachers arrived so we suggested that Brian might like to nip across the road to see the fresco of *The Last Supper*. Brian was standing back from the great work and seemed to be deep in thought. I asked what he was thinking and he said "If we moved the OHP a couple of feet to the left ..." Ever the professional!

Nick Dawson

Brian was a mentor to me; wise, helpful, funny, and always willing to share his talents. He and Ingrid taught me how to write, and I will always be grateful for that.

In common with many other people I guess, we used to speak regularly on the phone. What I enjoyed most was the sheer naughtiness of the man. He was always full of ideas, wandering into new areas: it was like having a conversation with a firework. A socialist firework, who was still absorbed with the news of what was happening in the world and still wanting to change it. He was full of passion, and iconoclasm, and fire and spirit.

The world will be a greyer place without him.

Steve Elsworth

This is an end of an era with Louis Alexander, Robert and Brian all part of that great British EFL explosion of the 60s, 70s and 80s no longer with us but we do have wonderful memories of a time in our lives that remains precious.

I was teaching in Germany from 1968 – 1990, involved with Adult Education – VHS teaching and training teachers for the German Adult Ed. Brian and Ingrid were frequent visitors to Germany because of the connection with Langenscheidt Longman. A group

of us worked on the books for the Strategies series and the videos that were part of the course. Brian was always a larger than life character and I will always remember him using 2 OHPs for his presentation plus lots of overlays and the Germans thinking where has he come from!

Our paths also crossed at IATEFL conferences in various places and countries. I remember one in Belgium when it was held in a holiday camp and we were given beads as currency and I thought Brian would blow his stack. He was a wonderful facilitator and educationist and always willing to pass on his knowledge to others.

Jane Ferentzi-Sheppard

Brian was one of the kindest, most thoughtful and generous people I have ever met. It was a huge pleasure and privilege to work with him for a number of years and I have so many happy memories of our meetings and lunches at Burlington Gardens with Brian at the head of the table always organising everything to make sure everyone was OK. I also have fantastic memories of our wonderful holiday at Trouya when Brian couldn't do enough to make sure that all the family had a great time there. Even after I left work he still made the effort to keep in touch and would ring up for a chat about how my boys were doing. He had so much enthusiasm for life and he could always make me laugh. Brian was a unique and special person and friend and I will miss him greatly.

Delia Greenall

As you know, I never actually met Brian, but over my 42 years, at what I would prefer to call Longman, I really felt I knew him, and am so sad, I really will miss our conversations, laughs and giggles.

Brian went out of his way to send cards and flowers when I had my breast cancer and broke my back, he even managed to find my home phone number to speak to me, such a lovely man, he really cheered me up.

Sandra Hoskins

Looking back at the more than 25 years I worked at Longman (as it was called when we all started out), I'd like to pay tribute to Brian as someone who touched the lives of everyone in the ELT division. His creativity and sense of fun had a positive effect on us all. Our experience of working there was enhanced by his spirit and larger than life personality, and he somehow made ELT glamorous! Like so many others, I loved his warmth and wit, his mischievous comments, his rich voice and bold handwriting. He was a very generous man and truly added sparkle to life. It somehow feels right that he died whilst on a cruise. If he'd been watching the story of his life in the theatre, I think he'd have approved of that ending.

Judith King

More than most great and admired writers, he empathised with his fellow professionals and used his influence to improve the lot of all authors. His enthusiasms were infectious and his occasional outrage with publishers was put to good effect.

Mark Lefanu

Brian's capacity for friendship was unique – as the tributes show, he made each one of us feel valued and special as well as being extraordinarily generous with his time, hospitality, wise counsel and unexpected acts of kindness.

I first met him at Ealing on teaching practice from the Institute of Education, I had to take his class (who looked crestfallen when this was announced) and teach white Strategies. It was during the power cuts, so feedback with him took place over a glass of sherry in his office by candlelight. Our friendship started then and was very important to me. I have such happy memories of visits to Burlington and after a hip operation I was given the house in St Lucia for a fortnight to recuperate. Just like that.

Hilary Maxwell-Hyslop

It is difficult to believe that such a big personality has gone from the world. He was undoubtedly the most creative writer I have ever worked with and in many ways – surprisingly – the least prima donnaish, always ready to take advice from Ingrid or Liz Waters. Like others I will greatly miss his periodic phone calls but they – and he – will never be forgotten!

Chris Nott

Over 35 years ago Brian turned up like a whirlwind at my Degree Show and in his usual flamboyant style left me his card and told me that he'd take me to meet his publisher in Harlow. He was as good as his word – which, with hindsight, showed an amazing level of trust, since I was straight out of college! But that was typical of him. He opened doors for many of us and then took great pleasure and interest in accompanying us on our journey.

Brian, Ev and Ingrid soon became part of my working and social life and the numerous day-long meetings with the team around the dining table at Burlington Gardens are by far the most enjoyable and rewarding times I've had working as a designer (with Brian needing his fix of ALL the Longman gossip over lunch, of course!).

He was part of our family and brought magic to our lives. Debbie and our daughters Jessica and Claudia will hold on to so many happy memories. Visits to Brian's Christmas Grotto at Burlington and long chats over Disney films are times they will always treasure! He was larger than life, full of fun, huge of heart and the most generous and trusting person I've ever met. I feel privileged to have known him and I'll miss him very much.

Steve Pitcher

Over the years, I benefited greatly from his friendship and continued generosity. This is exemplified by his response to a request I made in the early 2000s, when I needed material for a session on the 'History of ELT' for the MATEYL at the University of York. Here is his description of how he became a materials writer and is how I will remember him:

"Early in the 'Swinging Sixties' I was working in Sweden as a British Centre Lektor when I suddenly got fed-up talking about Big Ben and red double-deckers and returned jobless to Britain.

One winter evening, a friend played me a flimsy EP record with songs from Bonjour, an 'audio-lingual French course' for British primary schools published by Mary Glasgow and Baker. I loved its fresh authenticity and late that night wrote a letter of appreciation to Mary Glasgow herself. Amazingly, she invited me to lunch at the Oxford and Cambridge Women's Club in Pall Mall to 'talk about my adventures'. As well as teaching me how to eat globe artichokes, Mary asked if I could write a primary course in English called 'Hallo'. When I replied that I couldn't, she said theatrically, 'My dear, never say you can't do anything!' I never did again."

Philip Prowse

Brian didn't do dull. Life with him was in technicolour: going to Brian and Ev's for dinner would end up with an explosive sing-song with songs he had just written or a splash in the Burlington Gardens jacuzzi. Teeming life helped to fashion his writing. And, in turn, his enormous success as a writer gave him the chance to give back so much to those he knew. He was hugely generous and this generosity combined both his flamboyance and his thoughtfulness. Two aspects of character so often at odds but which came together in a lovely man, passionate about politics and parties. We are going to miss you so much.

Celia Roberts

Brian has been rightly praised as a ground-breaking ELT writer and thinker, and I'd just like to add another aspect of his influence. He was a very positive supporter to new writers who were trying to take their first steps in the profession. Not only did he encourage people to get involved in writing, he suggested ways that they could progress and routes they should try out. And he would check out that you were following up his suggestions. A lot of people might tell you that you've got talent, but Brian pushed you to make the most of it.

Brian loved to talk about the world of ELT and particularly its publishing arm. Any conversation you had with him about work was hilarious and often unrepeatable. He loved the world, and he gained a lot from it, but he could be a merciless critic of some of the ways that it operated.

Every business needs a smart, funny critic to question the way things are done. Brian was one of the best of these, combining a warm generous heart, a sense of fun and a brilliant, spiky way with words.

Ken Wilson

I shall always be grateful for having had the pleasure and privilege of knowing Brian, and working with him and with Ingrid for so many years.

Enormously talented and creative, Brian cared about everything: he was passionate about the quality of the teaching materials which he and Ingrid produced; he cared deeply about his friends and his work colleagues; and he had an abiding interest in politics.

I treasure the memories of sitting with Brian and Ingrid, and the Longman team, around the large dining table at the house in Burlington Gardens which he and Ev shared. As we engaged in the alchemy of producing Brian and Ingrid's latest ELT course, the discussion battled backwards and forwards around the table. We pored over the finer points of the manuscript, the design, the photographs and the artwork, and everything mattered. Even the shortest sentence would not go unexamined and unpolished. These conversations would invariably be punctuated by Brian's (sometimes outrageous) comments on the latest films, west-end musicals, TV celebrities and political events.

Remarkably generous both professionally and personally, stimulating, mercurial, and at times – in his phone conversations – barely intelligible as ideas and news tumbled over each other, Brian maintained a curiosity and zest for life which I both relished and envied. He taught me a lot about both ELT and the world beyond the classroom. I am proud to have known him, I still can't believe that he has gone and I shall miss him.

As Brian used to say at the end of our Burlington meetings: "Bye hearts. Safe journey."

Liz Waters

Funeral addresses on 12 February 2015 at Mortlake Crematorium

I met Brian in Thaxted, our Essex village, when I was nine or ten years old. He was a strange boy with a bicycle, absorbed in dangling a spider, but he spoke to me as if I was an old friend. He and his family had just come from Australia, he told me. He had to the last that ingenuous belief that he would automatically be liked – and he was.

We liked him – I and my two sisters – and we became inseparable. He became an honorary sister. (I in particular was close to him because we went to the same University together, in the same department, the University of Leicester.) The relationship was rarely strained, except on those occasions when, after we told him about the films we had seen in the temporary cinema set up every Saturday in the oddly named Bolford Street Schoolrooms, he had invariably seen them in Technicolor in Australia. But mostly we amicably exchanged our reading matter every two weeks. It became a ritual for us to seize upon *The Champion* with its stories of Rockfist Rogan and virtuoso ice hockey players, while Brian took home *Girls' Crystal*, to read about trouble in the dorm and to mull over sentences such as 'White to the lips, she shrank against the wall'. With the rather casual parenting of those days we rambled and cycled freely, and planned exploits together. Once, when my parents were away we arranged a full séance with a glass and letters round the table. In answer to our question, 'Is there a spirit there?' a Victorian lady introduced herself and told us about her clothes. Rather to our surprise my father also came online. All that he would say was that 'Mummy caught a cough [actually 'cof!]' at Carlisle. This turned out to be true, and I don't remember that we experimented again.

It would be right to say that we were all brought up by a village. The youth club, the walking tours, the country dancing every Tuesday night, Morris dancing in the street, music and incense in the high Anglican church, we took these for granted. Thaxted had a socialist Vicar, Father Jack Putterill. We did not know it but we were part of a historic upheaval, when the aristocratic socialist, the Countess of Warwick, had appointed socialist clerics to a number of East Anglian livings. Jack Putterill and his wife were engaged in creating a socialist community and this was formative for us. We were used to rows about the control of the WEA, the WI, injunctions not to go to the Festival of Britain as it was a purely nationalist project (Brian did). These may seem esoteric or trivial now, but we did learn about a socialist community at first hand. Brian's father, much to his embarrassment would paint socialist slogans on the roads travelled by the bus that took us to the Friends' School seven miles away (and which probably broke all safety standards).

Brian, myself, and one of my sisters embraced this culture. It became part of our lives. Brian was deeply troubled by my late elder sister's scepticism about it (you can see her views on Diana Wynn Jones's website). It worked against his ebullience and intense loyalty, a lived loyalty, to his past. And that's what I remember him for, his ebullience and loyalty.

Isobel Armstrong

In the context of English Language Teaching and publishing, I'm the other half of Brian. 'Brian and Ingrid' is often said in the same breath. It's hard to believe, but Brian has been part of my life for over 45 years.

There are, of course, a heap of memories to do with our working life together but just for now I wanted to talk about Brian, the friend, rather than Brian, the colleague.

Brian was, as we all know, a confident public figure – flamboyant, charismatic, generous, and often outrageous. But I knew a private Brian, who when he was with me and working together, didn't feel the need to impress or hold forth – a Brian who could be thoughtful, sensitive and kind – perhaps not adjectives you immediately associate with him, but of all the qualities I'll remember him for, it's his kindness to me that stands out.

When I returned from Sweden as a single parent at the end of the seventies with my three-year-old daughter Jessica, Brian and Evelyn immediately took us in – there was a spare bed for both of us, a pile of coloured pens and paper for Jessica, an enormous television screen for Sunday evening telly nights and endless wicked treats. And again, on another occasion, when I'd moved house in the mid nineties and was in a desperate state over what to do with our cat, Quintus, who needed a home, without a second thought Brian said: 'Bring him here. He can live with us.' That was so Brian – kind and generous to a fault.

And when you combine these qualities with his bubbling, creative energy and his passion for words, you get a very special person. He will leave a huge hole in my life, for sure.

I may be wrong, but I think Brian was ready to go. He wasn't a well man, and in the last few months he desperately missed not having Evelyn by his side. But on the plus side, during his spell in hospital over the summer, he had been able to speak to and meet up again with friends he hadn't seen for a very long time. We don't all get that chance. So, let's try not to be too sad when we say goodbye to him. Brian, you'll be remembered by a huge number of people, more fondly than you can imagine.'

Ingrid Freebairn

Brian loved showbiz but also to rebel, to shock and to surprise.

What that meant for us as children was Brian appearing out of boxes at birthday parties, huge firework displays, spontaneous Jacuzzi parties to celebrate a Labour government and great dinners with written agendas (like, Item 1 hate figures from school; Item 2 who I saw at the Ivy; Item 3 the Daily Mail and hissss Melanie Philips).

But most spectacular were Christmas celebrations, often shared with Ingrid and Jessica. There were giant trees and something Swedish to eat, as the older generation sunk endless shots of schnapps. Then finally would come the big moment – we would cut the ribbon on the sitting room doors – to reveal another huge tree dripping in decorations and amazing presents for us all. One year, I opened the doors to see, perched on top of a giant green swan, a new barbie doll. I actually became hysterical with happiness.

These nights were so fun and so Brian – incredible generosity, meticulous planning and a wonderous sense of theatre which he delighted in as much as we did. And that love and kindness was always extended to our friends and partners.

We went on a lot of holidays with Brian and Ev – and there always stories. Getting lost, getting stuck, flat tyres, drunk driving. There were many years at La Tocade. I can't remember Brian ever actually skiing – his days were spent in a robe with a bull dog clip providing just a nod towards decency. He would emerge from his bedroom in time for gin and tonics, raclette, card games, and rows about the Labour party.

And there was showbiz. Dinner at Joe Allens, a musical, often some naughtiness. Brian took me to my first 18 film when I was 8. He once took Ellie to the theatre in Regents Park – but they got so drunk on jellied bloody Mary shots, she can't remember if they saw the play.

Brian and Ev have given us a lot, and taught us a lot. They've taught us important things about politics and socialism, about theatre and culture and about being generous to the people you love. But when I think about Brian what I really think about is his sense of fun and about how he was never afraid to do something to excess. Surely he would like me to end with a line from Mae West – "Too much of a good thing can be wonderful."

Rachel Jupp, with contributions from Ben Jupp and Ellie Jupp

We met in 1965. Brian had come to help run a summer school for Sudanese teachers of English; we got on extremely well and had lots of interesting times, including Brian having four jelabias made to measure in the Omdurman Souk. I'm not sure Brian ever got fully dressed at home again after he got those jelabias.

The memories just flood in. This wasn't only a friendship of 50 years, but it was a friendship without any gaps for all those years; we were professional colleagues, politically engaged together and close family friends, and holidays together for 25 years.

Brian and Ev persuaded me to go into further education which shaped the whole of my future career. I worked with Ev and of Brian for the 12 years from 1970. Very creative years. Brian and I spent many hours planning communicative language teaching; it was a great radical time for English language teaching and we were confident we were on the leading edge of the changes. And there were the shared projects such as the diploma for a multi cultural society and Brian's support for our work at Pathway and NCILT. And the trips to Tesol: Hawaii, Houston where Brian and Ev stage managed my plenary session incredibly helpfully, and New York. Touring the old buildings of the new City and Islington College and agreeing most of them needed knocking down.

Part of the excitement of those years was that we felt we were contributing to a new sort of society. So canvassing in Brentford or Chiswick at every election was all part of the same thing. We watched every election result together from 1970, in the Jacuzzi in 1997 – you can imagine the screaming and weeping.

Politics was a big bond – the sense of shared values and a shared commitment – even when Ev betrayed her feminist principles and gave Rachel two Barbie dolls for Christmas! Political arguments with the whole family around the dinner table; anti-racism marches together in Southall and central London. Brian was so pleased that our three children shared this political engagement and was particularly thrilled when Helen, Ben's wife, was adopted as a parliamentary candidate for Labour in the coming election.

Brian was an amazing entertainer and creator of new experiences for his friends; pantos at Palewell and Burlington, breakfasts at the Wolsey, musicals, and, above all for me, skiing. So generous and so imaginative. So many things never to be forgotten.

I can't talk about Brian without mentioning Ev – such a good thinker, a determined organiser, a loyal friend. She made so much possible for Brian and he for her. Brian believed in Labour – gave money; Ev went out and did the work on the ground to his delight.

Brian was an instinctive judge of people; usually right, sometimes wrong. His joy and his weakness was that he insisted on having the world only on his own terms. He was deeply angry when he couldn't – whether it was personal betrayals or his own health. To adapt Dylan Thomas slightly, 'Brian did not go gently into his goodnight/ But raged, raged against the dying of the light.'

Brian, everyone here will miss you with real pain. You remain in our hearts even more than our heads.

Tom Jupp



Outstanding English Language Teaching
author and educator, generous friend,
Labour Party loyalist, and bon viveur.

Loving partner of Evelyn Davies and much
loved by friends and colleagues, he is
greatly mourned.

