

Obituary: Norman H. Brittan

(7 September, 1920 – 19 April, 2000)



A former President of the Royal Society of Western Australia, Norman Brittan passed away on 19 April, 2000.

Born on 7 September 1920 at Whitley Bay, Northumberland, Norman attended Rutherford College (Newcastle, UK) and went on to complete his BSc (1st class Honours) in Botany from the University of Durham in June 1941. His tertiary education was interrupted at this point by the war, in which he served as an army officer in Radar with REME. Returning to his studies after the war, he was awarded his PhD in 1950 from the University of Durham (King's College).

In September 1950, Norman migrated to Perth where he took up a position as lecturer in the Botany Department at the University of Western Australia (where he spent his whole professional career). His main areas of interest were plant anatomy, physiology and genetics, linked to systematics, and he taught in all these areas as well as supervising the research of several graduates in the Faculties of Science and Agriculture. Early in his time here he studied the legume genus *Kennedia*, producing a systematic and ecological overview with J H Silsbury in 1955. He then turned to the monocots, and the genus *Thysanotus* (fringed lilies) in particular. His research over the following decades (including periods at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, where he developed expertise in electron microscopy) resulted in a number of papers, with the description of 25 new species of *Thysanotus*. It was a great joy for Norman to explore

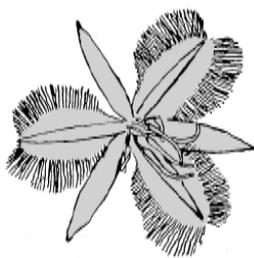
outback regions for specimens of his speciality genus *Thysanotus*. His work culminated in a revision of the genus in 1981 and an account for the 'Flora of Australia', published in 1987. A distinctive new species closely allied to *Thysanotus* was placed in a new genus, *Murchisonia* (1971), and another species was added in 1986. He also wrote *Arthropodium* and *Dichopogon* for the 'Flora'. Norman competently prepared his own line drawings. Following his retirement at the end of 1985 he was made an Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Botany, during which period he completed his 'Flora of Australia' work.

He was a long-standing member of the Royal Society Council (1953–63) serving variously as Council Member, Secretary, Vice-President and as President in 1960–61. At the end of his term he gave a Presidential Address entitled 'Variation, Classification and Evolution in Flowering Plants—with particular reference to *Thysanotus*' (*Journal of the Royal Society of Western Australia* 45:1–11, 1962).

Norman was associated for many years with the University's arm of the Student Christian Movement. He was an avid listener to classical music of many composers, both recorded and at concerts. Gentle and somewhat retiring, he was ever ready to advise and assist students and colleagues. He had a quite formidable talent at resolving complex issues, which made him an obvious choice on the University's timetabling committee, and in advising students as the Sub-Dean of the Faculty of Science (1962/63).

He is commemorated in the specific epithet of *Lomandra brittanii* Choo, named in 1984 by one of his post-graduate students.

Alex George and Bill Loneragan



Thysanotus pseudojunceus
from Brittan (1960)