

Book review: *Brian Shorland - Doyen of New Zealand Science*

Written by Joan Cameron and edited by Neil Curtis and Brian Halton

This book¹ traces the life of Brian Shorland from his boyhood in Island Bay, Wellington, through a professional life which starts as a cadet in agricultural science, while studying for a degree, progresses to a doctorate overseas, and to a professional scientist. Eventually he heads his own division of DSIR, and ultimately enters a fruitful retirement, during which he considers the broader implications of his scientific work.

The book's eighteen chapters portray not only Shorland's life, but also the milestones of the history of the development of the science of fats, and the changes in the culture of government funded science in New Zealand. This last feature is noted in the biography's foreword (p. v), and this book offers insights that are complementary to the more formal histories of New Zealand science, in particular that of DSIR.² The interplay of these three themes is shown in Fig. 1.

Cameron's biography reveals Shorland's innovative thinking at an early stage of his career – choosing to undertake his own research into the prospect for energy production from geothermal fields in his own time while a cadet at the Agricultural Chemical Laboratory, undertaking his own field trip by motorcycle to collect samples at Wairakei. His two jointly authored papers on this topic preceded others' formal investigation of the idea by more than two decades.³ On their own initiative, Shorland and a fellow cadet undertook research into oily eel meal after hours and in their spare time, incurring the wrath of their boss – Chief Agricultural Chemist. Barnev

Aston – when they sought to publish a paper about it in a scientific journal. Aston's anger at these upstarts' cheekiness subsided when the editor accepted the paper,⁴ since Aston was himself frequently published in the same journal. This incident probably resonates with older scientists who will remember the expectations of deference to senior staff implicit in the hierarchical structure of government scientific organisations throughout much of the twentieth century. In any event, having a few papers under his belt and scholarships from his studies at Victoria University College, Shorland was well equipped academically – if apprehensive socially – to venture to Liverpool University and to obtain a doctorate.

The break in the flow of Shorland's life story at Chapter 5 to give a historic perspective on fats research seemed an intrusion at first reading. It was only in the penultimate chapter that it becomes apparent that Shorland himself was delighted at the inclusion of such perspectives, and clearly gave the biographer a mandate to structure the book in this rather unexpected format (see Fig. 1).

Chapter 6 describes Shorland's doctoral research in 1935-1937, and corresponds to a small spike in the annual number of his publications (Fig. 2). The next two chapters describe perhaps less fulfilling parts of Shorland's career. The first of these chapters describes his involvement with the Karitane Products Society, which established a fish-liver oil factory in Melrose, a Wellington suburb (Fig. 3), at which Cameron was employed while an undergraduate student.⁵ The second of these chapters describes the

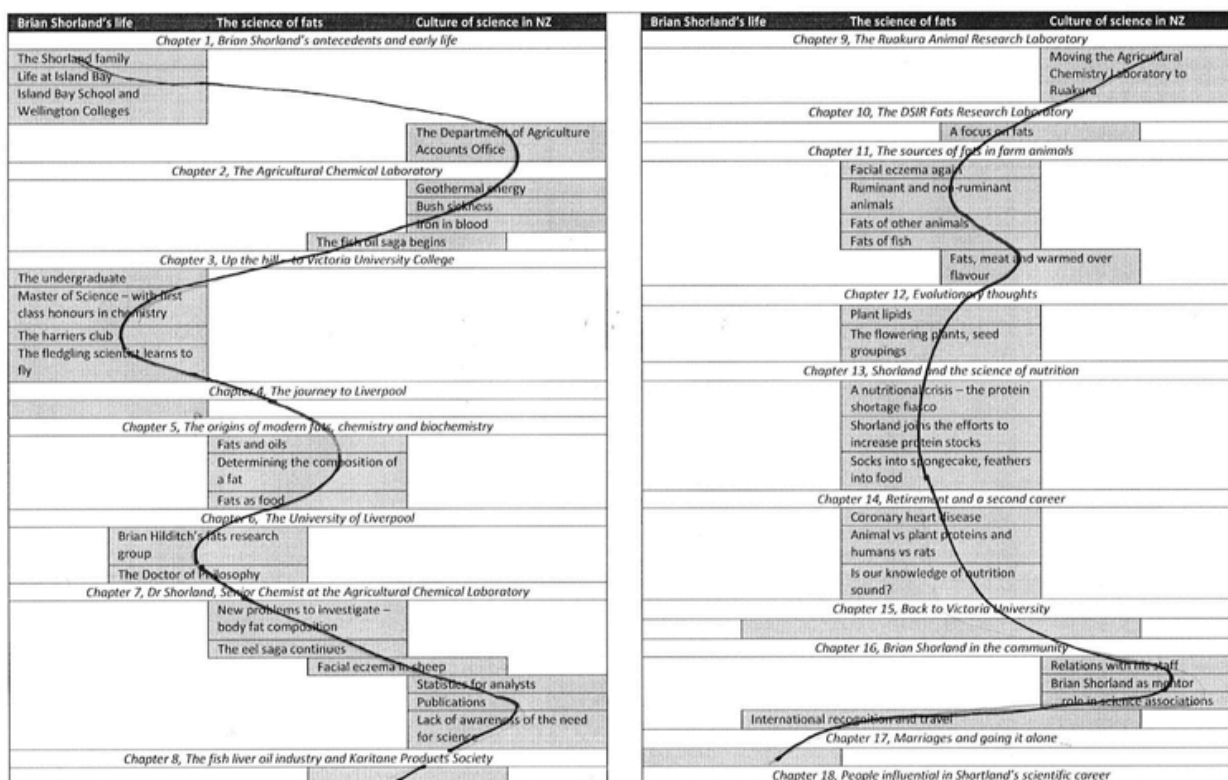


Fig. 1. Variation of themes in Joan Cameron's biography of Brian Shorland

establishment of the Agricultural Chemistry Laboratory at Ruakura on the outskirts of Hamilton, and culminates in Shorland's decision not to transfer to the newly established facility. Of that point in Shorland's career, Cameron writes, "What to do next? Shorland was at a point of despair! He went to see Dr Ernest Marsden, Secretary of the DSIR, and asked what he should do – meaning what could Marsden do?" (p. 83). In fact, Marsden was already well informed of Shorland's work and responded by telling him to "go home and write out a proposal for establishing a Fats Research Unit, and to give it to him next morning" (p. 84).

And so, the Fats Research Laboratory, with Shorland as its head, came to be established in old houses in Wellington's Sydney Street West. The Laboratory was ultimately incorporated into DSIR's Food Chemistry Division (p. 94),⁶ and was one of the last of a succession of government laboratories that occupied the initially impressive brick Dominion Laboratory building.⁷ These years were highly productive for Shorland in terms of his research (Fig. 2), with a trend towards an increasing interest in the nutritional value of fats, a matter which was to occupy more of his thinking in retirement (Fig. 4). In addition, he became interested in the prospects of manufacturing food from apparently inedible sources of protein. In the book, this is addressed in a section delightfully entitled 'Socks into spongecakes, feathers into food'.

Shorland was always critical of research which, although undertaken on animals, foresaw nutritional benefits for humans. This resonates with the debate about the health benefits of coconut oil,⁸ for which the testing has largely been done on animals,⁹ which surfaced during the writing of this review.

Required to retire from DSIR at the age of 60 in 1969, Shorland was one of many scientists of his era who were still able to remain intellectually active by involvement with other organisations. For Shorland this included a review on coronary heart disease for the Royal Society of New Zealand (Chapter 14), an honorary research fellowship in biochemistry at Victoria University of Wellington (Chapter 15) and an enhancement of his earlier involvement in science associations, including the New Zealand Association of Scientists (the publishers of the biography) and the New Zealand Institute of Chemistry (chapter 16). Shorland's increasing preoccupation with nutrition and health is marked by his involvement with organisations such as the New Zealand Nutrition Society and the Wellington Medical Foundation; indeed his very last paper is simply entitled 'Food for New Zealanders'.¹⁰ This period of his life also marks an excursion into somewhat eccentric self-sufficiency (pp. 150-152), Cameron's telling of which introduces a note of humour.

The last section of Chapter 17 – entitled 'Brian's last days' – is a personal reminiscence from his biographer, Joan Cameron. Here she recalls how the biography was commissioned: when she offered to write it, he pushed a pile of papers towards her, "saying dismissively 'Well, get on with it then'". She recalls the details of Brian's and her attendance at what was to be his final meeting as a mem-

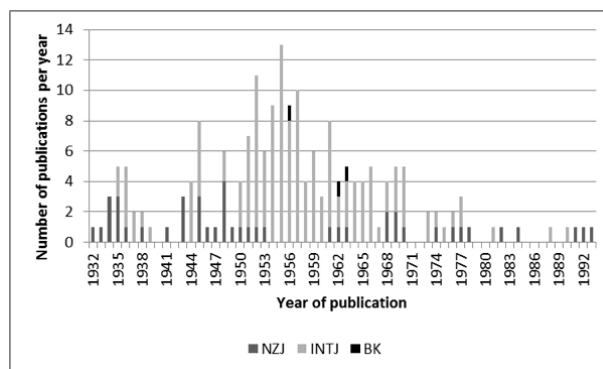


Fig. 2. Research productivity of Brian Shorland, 1932-1993, compiled from the biography's appendix (NZJ, Article published in a New Zealand journal; INTJ, Article published in an international journal; BK, Book.)



Fig. 3. The Karitane Products Factory in Melrose, Wellington, where during her employment as a laboratory assistant, Shorland's biographer probably first encountered Brian Shorland. The building, designed by prominent Wellington architect William Gray Young, is near the Karitane Hospital and Sir Truby King's residence. It has a category 1 rating on the NZ Heritage List and is currently used as residential accommodation. [Photo: <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/ChaStra-fig-ChaStra230a.html>]. For modern views of the building and its environs, see: <http://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/4431>.

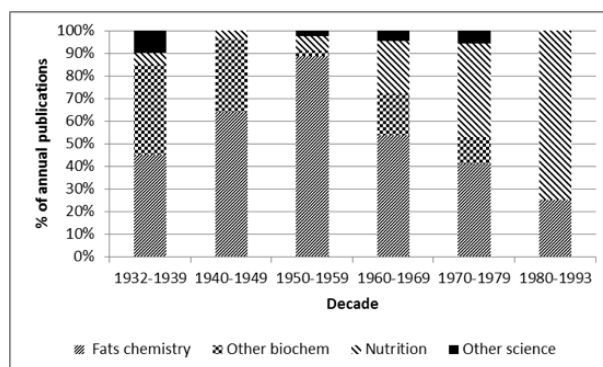


Fig. 4. Changing emphasis on research through Brian Shorland's career, compiled from the biography's appendix.

ber of the board of the Wellington Medical Foundation. Cameron must surely have been touched by the knowledge that her conversation with him during the evening two days later, in which he told her, 'You have put me in a far wider context than I had ever dreamed of. I think you're marvellous', was probably his last (p. 157).

While the end of Chapter 17 would have been a fitting point at which to close the book, Cameron (or perhaps her editors) chose to include as the book's final chapter biographies of twelve people who are purported to have influenced Shorland's scientific career. In fact, the most influential of these people are already mentioned in earlier chapters at the appropriate stages of Shorland's career, and so these biographies – if needed at all – might have been better as an appendix. Deletion of these pages might have made for a rather less cramped layout for the text, and perhaps the inclusion of additional photographs – all for the same cost of publication.

Nevertheless, the editors have produced from Cameron's work an interesting book about a twentieth century New Zealand scientist whose life and times deserve to be better known.

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