

THE MAN WHO TALKS TO BEES

June Whittaker **LOCAL WINNER**

June Whittaker lives in the foothills of Australia's 'High Country', where she enjoys her retirement in the rural lifestyle, the local community of Tumbarumba, and the time to read and write. She founded The Friends of Tumbarumba Library and, as a member of the local Writers Group, helped with the publication of a series of three books titled 'The Elders of Tumbarumba'. Early in her career she was a teacher and, shortly after, a lecturer at Wagga Teachers College. She later published a trilogy on the life of First Fleet convicts Henry Kable and Susannah Holmes. For ten years she was also history consultant for Old Sydney Town.



An appointment to Lecturer in History at the Australian School of Pacific Administration (ASOPA) started her on a career for the Australian Government to design and deliver training programs for developing countries of the British Commonwealth. From there her career progressed to Director of long-term regional programs to strengthen training institutions of those countries in fields such as teacher education, public administration, food security, grain storage, and climate change. Her work and extensive travel led to many publications, the more significant being New Guinea histories. In 2009 she was awarded an OAM for her service to international relations.

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Sam Brennan pulled up his 4WD beside a bowser in front of a lonely roadhouse on the Murray River Road. He was in a black mood. The old man who took his order to fill the vehicle's fuel tank with diesel, identified him as a man with a mission he did not want.

He was right: the driver was a newspaper reporter who resented the assignment he had been given by his irascible editor: 'If you can't find anything at your front door worth reporting,' the editor had told him, 'take yourself into the backblocks of the State and see what you can find there to stir your blood. Find your way into the Upper Murray and look around for persons of interest, as coppers call them.'

The old man gave the windscreen a final wipe with his cloth.

'Do you know of any person of interest who might be living in these parts?' Sam asked him.

There was a long pause while the man organised cloths and cleaning fluid in his bucket. 'Person of interest? Now what sort of person would that be?' Bees were crowding around the car's engine. He watched Sam swipe at them, then offered: 'There's a chap with a place further along who keeps bees.'

'What's interesting about that?'

'Don't know. Says he likes bees. Talks to them.' 'And where might I find this interesting linguist?'

This same road will take you as far as *Tom Groggin*. Keep along the Victorian side of the Murray. There's a sign that says *Innisfree*.

Sam headed south, questioning what he was doing, driving so far to talk to a crazed outcast of society who talked to bees. He was disillusioned about the career he'd chosen; and his assignments gave him little chance to improve his status.

The road sign, *Innisfree*, appeared sooner than he expected. He parked near the gate of a stone cottage. A woman walked up the path to meet him. She wore a light white cotton shirt and slacks. Up close, he judged her to be middle-aged and reasonably attractive. 'Hello,' she said, extending her hand, 'I'm Greta Sharpe.' Sam shook her hand. 'Sam Brennan. 'Does Tom Groggin live here?'

She laughed gaily. 'Golly, I hope not. My husband Philip and I are the only residents.' She registered his confusion and went on soberly: '*Tom Groggin* is a corruption of an Aboriginal word, *tomarogin*. It means "water spider".' 'Well, where am I then?'

'Oh, you are quite near *Tom Groggin*, but there's nothing much to see - except camping sites.'

Sam sought the high ground in their interchange. '*Innisfree* doesn't fit very well with the Aboriginal name for a water spider.'

'Why not?' she challenged lightly. 'The Irish and the Aborigines are both mystical people with their own ancient languages. Philip and I love Yeats' poem that runs: *I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree, And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made: Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee, And live alone in the bee-loud glade*'. She had walked him slowly into the coolness of the cottage. 'Philip is down in the bee-loud glade, Sam. He said for you to join him there.'

'You knew I was coming?' he asked, suspicious.

'Oh, yes. Lenny Howard phoned us from the road-house. He said you were looking for a person of interest. Has there been a crime?' Without waiting for his reply, she went on: 'It would be a good idea to take off your coat to expose your nice white shirt: the bees do not like dark colours. And this cap will cover your hair: the bees don't like hair either, especially if it's a bit sweaty.' She unhooked a cap from the wall and handed it to him.

Philip Sharpe was wearing white cover-alls and a cap like his own. There were seven or eight bee-hives at the foot of the garden: white wooden boxes, where crowds of bees moved busily in and out of narrow openings. Philip turned when he heard Sam's approach, and after an exchange of introductions, they moved to a garden seat. One or two bees circled nearby. Sam edged away.

'They are just curious,' Philip assured him. 'They said you are welcome.' 'They *said* I was welcome?' Sam almost sneered his disbelief.

Philip smiled. 'Well, let's agree that they communicated their acceptance of your visit. They have their own ways of communicating. As you can see, none of them is showing more than a polite interest in your presence.'

'Where did you learn about bees?' Sam asked, suspecting a snub, but surprised by the man's cultured speech.

'Was it from books or ... another bee-keeper?' He had had to check himself from saying 'another nut like yourself'.

'Originally, both. My grandfather had hives in his garden. He taught me to respect bees as a superior life-form: creatures willing to share their wisdom if they are acknowledged as essential members of one's community.'

My grandfather would always put on his best clothes and hat before walking to the hives and informing them of events in the family - birth of a child, a wedding, a death, a natural disaster. Bees keep the harmony of the household, you know. More importantly, they sustain our world. There would be no world without bees.'

'Do you make a good living ... from honey sales I mean?' Sam took out his reporters notebook. He was determined to move the interview onto solid facts.

'Oh, no, just a bare living from supplying a few permanent customers. I'm too busy to do more than take off the honey when I see the frames are over-loaded, or bees swarming around a queen, about to look for new accommodation.'

'Why did you and your wife choose this spot to live?'

'We didn't choose it. The bees did. It was just one of the sites we looked at.'

We spent some time in each and let them make the decision for us. I never make an important decision without consulting them. Bees always know best. Anyway, we live in the city most of the year - we have to make a living, you know! We come to our cottage here only in the summer when the honey is flowing. Other times of the year, we come up regularly to check for nasties - moth in the hives or wasps.'

'What sort of work do you do in the city?'

'I had a job in security. Now I drive cars for government ministers. I drive them to meetings ... to catch flights ... that sort of thing.'

'I guess the politicians must be cared for, whether they deserve it or not.' 'I wish they'd care more about preserving the health of bees. They can't seem to grasp that a crisis is looming.'

Sam mentally relegated the bee-keeper's view of a crisis to a rubbish bin. 'You must find your job boring,' he suggested. 'Like driving a taxi?'

'Waiting around for ministers could be boring, but it gives me plenty of time to read. I always keep a book by me.' He chuckled with the relaxed humour of a boy, then suggested they stretch their legs by walking into the forest '*to view honey trees rather than gossip about them*'.

Sam rose with him. 'Why *Innisfree*? Your wife says it's something to do with Yates' garden seed.'

'Oh, that's good! It's a fancy of Greta's. She's interested in the Celts ... their history ... their art. She'll tell you that in Celtic Irish law, it is illegal for a bee to sting a person who has done it no harm. If the garden where the suspect bee came from can be identified, the owner must pay compensation.'

As they walked into the blue-green depth of the forest, Philip asked: 'Are you married, Mr Brennan? Perhaps you have a companion who is impatient for your return?'

Sam hesitated just long enough to indicate he did not like the question. 'Mary and I have been married for five years.'

Philip followed up lightly: 'And does your wife have a profession? Or has she a full-time job keeping track of you?'

'Mary's a nurse. She cares for the aged. In her spare time, she likes to paint.' He was aware his tone was abrupt, so he added: 'Landscapes! She likes to paint landscapes.' He left it at that: he did not think it was any of the beekeeper's business to know that his marriage was shaky.

Philip's hand on his elbow urged Sam forward. 'See that Yellow Box with its rough yellowish-grey bark? Some people call it Honey Box, because it's the best of all Australian trees for high quality honey production. But it has a low pollen yield. Native birds love it because it gives them wonderful nesting and refuge sites.'

Butterflies and caterpillars, also. Plenty of nectar, you see.'

Sam noticed how carefully Philip trod around ground-covering, stopping frequently to examine grass. 'Here's a patch of mountain tussock,' he called to Sam, 'and this here is tassel sedge; the more common variety is leafy and flat.'

In the deep shade areas, he pointed out ground-fern and bent low over it, muttering as he examined it closer. Well! Sam told himself, my host not only talks to bees, he talks to weeds!

Sam had had enough. He turned back to the house. There, he refused Philip's offer of an hour's fishing, and rejected the light meal his wife had prepared. He lost no time hitting the road.

Subsequently, the name "Sam Brennan" appeared as a byline to a humorous piece in *The Age* with the lead: *The Man Who Talks to Bees*. Sam sent a copy to *Innisfree*. Later in the year he received a post-card from Philip Sharpe, addressed to him at his city office:

Sam: I have a new job. I catalogue plants at the State Herbarium.

The Minister for Agriculture picked up the book I'd been reading about biodiversity. Though I have no formal qualifications, he recommended me to the Herbarium's Director. It's a lowly position but I love it. Besides, the bees were wildly enthusiastic when they understood we would be only four days a week in the city before making a beeline for Innisfree ...

Sam showed the note to Mary, who was diverted by the bee-keeper's tale of his unlooked-for advancement. Sam did not share her interest; he did not bother to reply. He slipped the note into a drawer.

Mary empathised with Sam in his professional disappointments; she had experienced being let-down herself a number of times. Sam would have dearly loved an overseas posting, and she tried to encourage him by suggesting tactics; but he was quick to take offence. She found escape from his gloom in painting, and in the company of her like-minded friends.

Their separation was inevitable. Mary elected to move out. Sam did not try to dissuade her and when, in their last weeks together, another post-card arrived from Philip Sharpe, he did not share it with her, but crammed it, unread, into the drawer with other trivia.

They had been separated for nearly two years when Sam, shuffling through that same drawer, found the unread post-card. He scanned it while eating his usual stand-up breakfast:

Sam: I am now Director of the State Herbarium. The previous Director died suddenly. His specialisation was in grasses. As grasses are my main interest, I replaced him. It was not my idea: I pleaded old age and lack of qualifications, but the Minister would not listen. My colleagues colluded with the Minister to ensure I remain in the position. The bees would not help me in this matter.

PS. It is time you made a return visit to Innisfree.

Recollecting how the bee-keeper's unsought career had entertained Mary, Sam suddenly felt a longing to share this humorous story with her. But they had had no contact since she left. Mary had not asked for a divorce. He had no idea where she was. The days rolled on; his idea of sharing the story died.

The first warm days of summer brought Sam a chance meeting with an old friend who asked after Mary and casually mentioned that he had recently seen one of Mary's paintings in an exhibition held at the Art Gallery! The road to *Innisfree* was much as Sam remembered it. And there, at last, was the stone cottage - the one in Mary's landscape, with just the suggestion of bee hives in the misty distance.

A woman emerged from the cottage, regarding his approach. Sam was through the gate before he realised the

woman was not Philip's wife, Greta, but his own wife, Mary! She was wearing white overalls spotted with bright splodges of paint!

She greeted him calmly. 'I was hoping you'd come some day ... when you were ready. Philip said you would come.'

Sam stared, perplexed. '*Philip* told you?'

'I met Greta and Philip long ago at the Art Gallery. We became friends. I moved up here at their invitation. You can see my cabin from here.' She pointed it out to him. 'Philip used it as a shed. I've renovated it. It is now my studio.'

Sam saw defiance in her eyes. 'But how ... ?'

He looked about him. Everything rested in the stillness of the mid-day heat. 'Where are the Sharpes?' 'In Europe, attending a conference. Philip has retired, but he's still much in demand as a consultant. He's considered a world authority on the unique nature of bees, and their role in perpetuating life on this planet. It's ironic, don't you think, that we humans are our own enemy!' Receiving no response, she hesitated, then pressed on. 'Philip grumbles that he's getting too old to run things here; but they both love the place too much to leave. I step into the breach when I'm needed.'

Sam noted absently how well she looked - her new confidence and her serenity. 'Do the Sharpes know ... about us?' he asked.

'Of course.' They stood in a widening pool of silence. Mary broke it: 'Would you like a cup of tea?' Sam heard the tremor in her voice and felt her hand on his arm. His own hand seemed to move without his willing it, to close over hers. 'I saw your landscape. The one in the Art Gallery.'

Mary looked up at him and grinned. 'I bet you are wondering whether I talk to the bees!'

Sam raised her hand and planted a kiss on her palm. 'Do you think I might stay here with you — and learn to talk to bees?'