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IN SEARCH  
OF  
TOM BOWEN

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And The Therapy He Inspired

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Everyone is entitled to their own opinions...  
but no one is entitled to their own facts.

James Schlessinger  
(former prominent USA bureaucrat).

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# PRELUDE

This is a story of inspiration, deception, pain and joy with good dashes of tragedy and intrigue. Someone should write a book about it.

Who is Tom Bowen and what is Bowen Therapy/Bowen Technique?

Bowen Therapy, or BT as we shall refer to it as I'll have to write it a million times, was named after Thomas Ambrose Bowen (1916–1982) – hereafter mostly referred to as TB, for the same reason. Apart from a few years as a boy, then later for a few years as a young man when he lived in what is now Greater Melbourne, Bowen lived and worked from the late '50s, as a manual therapist in bayside Geelong, near Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. The bits of his life we've been able to piece together and the manual therapy he inspired are a great deal of what this book is about.

For most people in the Bowen Therapy world the history of Tom Bowen and Bowen Therapy has already been written. It's been that way for a few years now. What we see in a couple of books on the subject and on a plethora of internet web sites is the tale of a remarkable man who magically devised a remarkable technique. The story goes that he bestowed his gift to only a select few who, by virtue of their bestowment, held special insight – they were enlightened beings.

The story's been nicely packaged up and tied down with string and bows and repeated so often that it's become fact. That there are variations on the basic theme, such as a claim to 'ownership' and special privileges not bestowed on others, is neither here nor there. The story of the history of Tom Bowen is a fait accompli. Well, at least it was meant to be so.

Unfortunately nobody had done any real research or analysis.

This is not a definitive history book even though it serves in many instances to re-write accepted history. This is the story of how I find the world of Bowen Therapy (and quite a few other bits) based around a search for Tom Bowen. He's been there waiting to be found. It just needed someone to look.

Placing Bowen Therapy in its correct context in the history of the world of manual therapies is not easy but it's important that we try. And it's also important to explore where and how BT's unique concepts emerged.

We'll try and sort out lots of this good stuff.

Col Murray

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is a long list of interviewees without whom this book would not have been possible. To their generosity with time, and patience with my bumbling, a huge thanks. You all get mentioned.

A BIG acknowledgement must be to the Bowen kids; Heather Edmonds, Pamela Trigg and Barry, especially H&P for their wonderful ability to respond positively to information, even that which they'd rather not have heard from me. Without their support, this job would have been no fun. Heather and Pam have been an ongoing source of contact though I reckon they've often wondered what they'd gotten themselves into.

Barry's openness too was a joy.

To the many people who offered and often provided, information and enthusiasm for the project, many thanks. You know who you are and you're too numerous to mention.

To my old mate Tim Britten to whom I entrusted the final edit and 'readability' components of the project with the instructions to be cruel to me. I had no idea he'd be as cruel as he was. Thanks chum.

To researchers Peter Gill and Betty Horskins, Francesca Folk-Scoluro of the Brunswick Historical Society, Cheryl Timbury at the Geelong Heritage Centre and Judy Madigan MP; jobs well done. And thanks to Hans A. Baer, PhD at Melbourne University.

Also thanks to Richmond Football Club museum for allowing me to rip Ernie Saunders' photos off the wall and scan them, and to Elaine Kranjc for checking out the Geelong Cement factory museum. National Archives of Australia, Public Records Office Victoria, RMIT University Library, Victorian Parliamentary Library and the Victorian State Library were invaluable. And thanks also to Robert Le Page Haines for his assistance.

Special thanks to the Australian Army History Unit and of Writeway Research services P/L, in particular John Tilbrook CSM, RFD, JP.

Palmer Higgs Pty Ltd is a company partnering authors through the self-publishing maze – and more. Many thanks to Paul Higgs and crew.

And finally, to my partner Lisa Black, who has shared the ordeal and kept ISBT going while I pursued this fantasy, who bashed me over the head mercilessly with some stories and passages and patted me lovingly on the back over others, who was locked out of the process in the early stages while I battled to find my way, then embraced it when she found hers; a Big THANKS Bubbles. Okay, now we can have a holiday.

# DEDICATIONS

I have several dedications for this book. Firstly to my dad whom I never really understood (at the time) and secondly my dear old mum who could never understand me and what I did. When I was edging towards my mid-fifties mum said to me “Colin, when are you going to settle down.” She was gorgeous. And she was the only person allowed to call me Colin.

I'd also like to dedicate this to the manual healers of old. To those whose often selfless dedication brought relief to so many people, especially those who could ill-afford to pay medical bills and those whom medicine could not help. I pray I do them justice. They were real healers; special people to whom many of us today owe great debt.

It's unlikely we shall see their likes again to any great extent. They are basically not 'allowed' to exist any more. As chiropractor Romney Smeeton said,

*“Probably the fact that we have to all be at certain levels of education, I think, will prevent people of that innate talent ever coming to the fore again. Their intuitive talent is killed with education because they then look on health in a blinkered fashion. To work like those guys did, you've got to look at it with a different pair of glasses.”*

Is there an optometrist in the house?



# THE AUTHOR



**M**y name is Col Murray (but that's not who I have always been). I'm a Co-Founder (along with my partner, Lisa Black) and Co-Director (ditto) of the International School of Bowen Therapy (ISBT). (But that's not what I've always done).

I haven't written a full-on book like this before but I have edited two books for world renowned automotive engineer, the late Phillip Edward Irving MBE. Phil designed the Repco-Brabham Formula One race car that (Sir) Jack Brabham used

to win a world title. He also designed the Vincent V-twin motorcycle which is/was a classic in every sense. I've also edited (and sometimes written and/or published) a few newspapers and magazines.

In researching for this book, my role as a Bowen Therapy school Director has been extremely useful in allowing me insights that I might otherwise not have considered. It might be expected that my position might simply influence my opinions...and I do have opinions. That I spent many years pretending to be a journalist has helped me approach difficult, close to the bone issues at arm's length. You'll just have to believe me on that point. Certainly there are some ideological issues which, at a personal and business level, cannot be separated.

That's life.

I think this is the sort of book that usually gets written a couple of generations down the track by someone who was not necessarily as close to the subject as I am.

Bowen Therapy, born out of concepts passed on by Tom Bowen, is at an interesting stage in its history. (I guess I could say the same about me, though somewhat on a different scale.) If you have nothing better to do and you'd like to know more about me, including why I haven't always been who I am and why I would edit the above books and, more to the point, my history in bodywork, you'll have to read the bit at the back of this book.

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## A matter of Style, The Journey, Creative Storylines and Mythconceptions

There is a degree of etiquette involved in giving recognition via a footnote on a page to sources of information. That might be of great assistance and enjoyment to a small number of scholars. But most of us aren't scholars and don't really care about and get very annoyed with the distraction as we search for our position on the page after finding that the reference was just to a document that has no interest at all to us, such as <sup>79</sup> *Headline in Safeway pamphlet* or <sup>(63)</sup> *Fred Bloggsworthy*, p.193 *How to Distract People from a story. Wanker Publishing 1967.*

Bloody annoying. Doubly annoying is when someone footnotes him or herself from another publication they'd authored – <sup>126</sup> *Murray: In Search of Tom Bowen and the Therapy He Inspired and Lots of Other Stuff*, 2010, p.982, *third paragraph from the top, Sentence starting "There is a degree of etiquette involved..."*. That, I reckon, is weird. Hang on; if I do get around to writing something else in the future, I'll be able to quote myself from this book just like that. Sounds pretty cool. Can I change my mind on that idea? Maybe not.

However, I have used the technique of footnoting in this book. To a degree. To a few degrees actually. But often I have endeavoured to use the style to tell a little story that may or may not have anything to do with the main body of the story. That way, if you get distracted at least you'll have something to read. On occasion I've actually used a reference so as not to detract from the story if I've had a bit of a ramble, which is a distraction in itself, but I won't be distracted in saying what I have to say. At least there are no ongoing references to sources in footnotes.

**Access to information** these days is astonishing. So, anything that stands out as a genuine and/or really useful source usually gets a nod in the text. There may be exceptions. Others can easily be sifted on the internet by putting in the right words.

Another style-ish thing with this book is the use of quotation marks. All quotes are in *italics* and I haven't splashed quote marks around with reckless abandon. In large bodies of quotes I've simply stuck them at the start and at the end. The rest is obvious. I'd considered not using quote marks at all, instead just using italics, but I like a good quote and besides, italics can be *useful* in non-quote situations, such as creating *emphasis*. You can quote me on that.

Being aware of the level of misleading information that has been generated on the www in relation to Bowen Therapy, it was with a degree of trepidation that I sought information about just about anything to do with anything, especially manual therapies. So I've tried not to treat anything I've read as being Gospel, comparing the information with whatever other sources I could find. While this

is still a flawed system, at least, by using a little nous, judging what is outright marketing in relation to whoever's written the sites and comparing them to others I think I've often got pretty close to the mark. Anything that is not labelled Tom Bowen or Bowen Therapy by its content, I cannot, 100 per cent, unequivocally guarantee. And I'm not sure that even the bits I'm 100 per cent sure about are entirely correct. Or something.

If there's a 'truth,' I've tried to put it in even if the story has to suffer. Maybe it is a better story that Tom obtained his ideas from God, Aborigines and/or Japanese POW guards instead of by watching another bloke. If someone makes a movie about TB maybe they can use a little creative licence and have a Japanese POW guard angel and an aborigine spirit angel bringing a back-healing message from God. Covers all fantasy bases. But not reality.

It was a little bit daunting to write about my peers in the Bowen world but I have tried to view everyone on a level playing field. If you've written or said something that is silly, *not my fault!* If you've done something good, hopefully I've recognised that too. I really am sincerely apologetic to those of you who might get upset at some of the things I say even if I believe something you've said or done is inappropriate. I know how it feels.

**Some in the Bowen** Therapy world have accused me of being disruptive and, as one prominent person put it, 'righteously indignant' about Tom Bowen and Bowen Therapy.<sup>1</sup>

I might not describe myself thus but I guess that is a fair description if it means that I tend to get a little annoyed with people who wax over-lyrically about their past, specifically in the context of Tom Bowen and Bowen Therapy. There is some very aggressive marketing going on in our patch. It's a jungle out there in Bowenland.

The stuff about which I write is what I believe Bowen Therapy was at the start and is now plus a few bits in between, some of the bits in between being personal aspects as they relate to the story at hand. I enjoyed the parallels I found with my life. You might not want to know anything much about me so gloss over those bits if you like. Devin wants them in so who am I to deny my son and heir.

I'm no angel. Never have claimed to be one. It's possible for us all, in a fit of romance, to gild the lily a little from time to time. It's just that some of us go lightly on the gilding while others slap it on with reckless abandon. If I am in error somewhere, I'll be happy for the error to be pointed out as I have not set out to be incorrect.

I started out thinking that this had to be an academic styled publication. A few thousand words later I changed my mind. I've read a lot of conventional 'papers' on various subjects, especially those

<sup>1</sup> I took it as a compliment even though it might not have been meant that way. Take a compliment where you can find it, I reckon.

related to bodywork, and decided that they all seemed to be written by the same person. I did not want this document to be written by that same person. Anyway, when you don't have a formal qualification to hang your hat on it might be difficult to be accepted academically. If you were looking for a publication without opinions, this is not it. I've been too closely involved with the subject(s) not to have an opinion or two.

### **Creative Story Lines and Mythconceptions**

When I was a little tacker, we had at home a set of encyclopedias. The sort that door to door salesmen flogged, only I reckon this lot would have fallen off the back of a truck (explained elsewhere). Probably Britannica. I wasn't into reading too much of the text but they had lots of good pictures. I remember two things from the whole set really well. One was a picture of a large, fierce-looking gorilla with the strange caption underneath, '*who dare meddle wi' me.*' It was pretty scary for a little kid and my older brothers took advantage of the image to 'gorilla' me from time to time.

The second was an illustration of a series of faces in a progressive story line that started with a chap by the name of John Brown owning a dog. Face one tells this information to face two. Face two is next shown facing face three and saying 'John has a brown dog' and so, with each new face the story continues on down the line through 'John's dog is dirty' until 'John Brown's a dirty dog.' The development of the story line serves to illustrate the reality of story-telling where 'facts' develop depending on the understanding or creative enthusiasm of the orator and, generally, what they seek to achieve. Facts can bend quite naturally, often with the story teller not aware of their errors. That, in itself, can be scary.

This creative development explains some of the weird and wonderful stories that have developed about Tom Bowen and Bowen Therapy. An example in the John Brown style might be with the fact that he treated animals, including horses. It appears that some of the horses he treated were used for racing. There are stories of successes that followed treatments but one story has developed to the extent that he not only saved a horse from being withdrawn due to injury from the Melbourne Cup, one of the world's great gallop events, but that the horse went on to win what is now a multi-million dollar event. If you were going to colour a story about horse racing to make it sound more amazing, Australia's Melbourne Cup is the event to use. And you wouldn't want to end the story by saying 'the horse came last,' now, would you?

We are told that Bowen had marvellous success with animals. He inspired a rapidly growing Equine Bowen industry. We know he treated racing greyhounds. Bowen on Small Animals is also a burgeoning industry. And while story development as illustrated

might be seen as John Brown normal, anyone being deliberately creative to further personal aims is deceitful and does no justice to one of our great healers.

But then again, it's a bloody good story.

In Tom Bowen's case, there is no need to be creative with the truth and/or stray from facts, even those that are not flattering. His story stands by itself. But the John Brown concept looms large in the story of Tom Bowen and the therapy he inspired. It raises its ugly head in many different guises, as we shall see. There are mythconceptions along every step of the Bowen journey.

### **The Journey**

During this journey I came across some things that annoyed, some things that inspired and others that flabbergasted me. My flabber was gasted by soooo many websites with soooo many variations of misguided information about TB and BT. I also discovered lots of good sites and many good books. One book that served to inform, entertain and reinforce ideas et al, was Phillipa Martyr's 'Paradise of Quacks.' This is a scholarly developed history of Alternative Medicine leading up to and during the current European occupation of Australia. Full of wonderfully interesting facts, the book observes the early battle ground for hearts and minds, not to mention dollars (or pounds, as they were then) of the diverse population, fought by Orthodox Medicine and the many alternatives. The refusal by the Establishment to recognise anything outside the narrow parameters it sets for itself, always based around a supposed 'scientific model' to the exclusion of other concepts, was prominent 200 years ago and is still with us. As I am bound to point out from time to time.

A great part of the challenge, in addition to attempting to gather all the information together while leading my gypsy life-style, has been to write impartially about the perceived wrongs that evolved. If you read my very early drafts you would note that I was often failing on that score. But given the length of time that has been involved in this process and opportunity to seek wiser counsel – especially an older me who has been able to gain a more universal view – that challenge of impartial writing has faded. Mostly. Maybe I failed sometimes. In doing this book, I can't avoid raking over the coals of the fires that have previously burned and I see no point in hosing down the facts. They burn brightly.

I spent a long time over the past five or six years since starting this project not putting this book together. There was the business about supposing to be in business. We have a business so we can keep travelling so we can keep our business going. It's a nice way to do it. We consciously made it that way assisted with a good bit of good fortune. Make that 'lots' of good bits of good fortune. And quite a few lovely people who joined our vision.

When our travelling was interrupted by a bit of work (is that what they call it?), it was usually in a place where we really wanted to be. After three years of spending a good bit of on and off time in the wonderful Rhineland region of Germany, then almost the same in the weird and wonderful city of Berlin, we pounced on the opportunity to spend time in Portugal. We also get to spend time in other places in Europe, South America and Asia on a regular basis. We have a most fortunate life.

During our Rhineland time, where we needed to deal with Germany's notorious bureaucracy,<sup>2</sup> we scored a wonderful family deal to go to Majorca for a week. We'd stressed ourselves out resolving all sorts of things that, when you do what we do, the way we do it, occasionally arise. We just had lots happening. A week in Majorca, half-board in a four star hotel for next to nothing (well, almost)? Why not!

It was a good idea at the time. Day One I felt very strange and wonky. This was followed by two and a half weeks shared between hospital and the hotel room before I literally staggered onto a bus for the one hour trip to the airport, then the two hour flight home. Horrific. Then there was about two years of dizzily falling over and/or having a fat headed cloudy brain, before The Girl<sup>3</sup> using BT and our dear friend, Andrea Kargel-Schwanhauesser (soon to be Kargel, thank goodness), otherwise known as Slim, from Berlin, using her special Cranio-Sacral work, knocked it on the head, so to speak. The Girl<sup>4</sup> pretty much had to carry the bag of our work at that time. And I saw nothing of Majorca.

The travelling, the illness and being necessarily distracted have meant that the years wandered by without enough being done on *The Book*. But that was then, this is now; a time when I've done all I want to do for the moment and it's time to tell you about the journey.

This is my story of what I believe to be true based on facts available with a lot of opinion and personal comment thrown in; my search for Tom Bowen and the therapy he inspired. And lots of other stuff. Bowen Therapy has taken wing and will continue to fly and despite my best intentions the misinformation will remain. But I relish this chance to straighten the ledger a little.

2 Dealing with German bureaucracy in the Rhineland Pfalz was an enlightening, very annoying, most confusing and a generally unsatisfying experience. Avoid it if you can.

3 'The Girl' is my partner Lisa Black. 'The Girl' is who she's always been in our travel diaries over the last 10 years.

4 See above.

# THE PLAYERS

There are many people who figure in the story of Tom Bowen and the therapy he inspired. Here's a run-down of the main players – except for Tom and Ernie Saunders – in no particular order.



### Tom Bowen

You're going to read a lot about him. After all, he's what this book is all about. This wonderfully compassionate man had an often troubled personal and professional life. As a therapist, he was given a tune and played a symphony.



### Ernie Saunders

You probably wouldn't be hearing much about Tom Bowen without Ernie Saunders. A truly legendary healer in Australia through the 1930s to his death in '51. His son George also figures prominently.



### Barry Bowen

TB's only son. Barry, living in the USA, had never talked to anyone about his dad and family life. He had a very different perspective than his sisters on many issues.



### Keith Davis

Chiropractor. Observed TB over a lengthy period. Source of good leads and inspiration for other prominent Bowenwatchers.



### Kevin Ryan

Osteopath,  
Naturopath.

Observed TB over a period of a couple of years. Has some, well, interesting views on aspects of contemporary Bowen Therapy. Initially turned down an offer to observe Tom Bowen then, discovering TB's ability, requested to be an observer.



### Maureen Alexander

Psychologist.

Former nutritionist and nutritional supplement manufacturer/distributor (among other things). Claims to have observed TB over a period of a couple of years. She seems to do pretty much what everyone else does. I have little reason not to believe her. Appears to have been known to TB through her lecturing.

### Pamela Trigg and Heather Edmonds

The development of work based on what their dad was doing and the level of interest it has created has caused Pam and Heather some anguish but also reawakened their fond and proud memories. It's been an interesting time for them.



# THE PLAYERS



## **Bob Lucy**

Flamboyant Natural Therapist. Husband of Maureen Alexander, who conducted a Bowen-style course which Maureen claims she developed. Led to the teaching of an interpretation of Bowen's work in the late '70s. Spent a little time in Ossie Rentsch's clinic, according to Maureen, teaching Ossie a few things about nutritional supplements. And watching Ossie work, it seems.



## **Romney Smeeton**

Chiropractor. Observed TB over a period of a couple of years. He reckoned a good percentage of Tom Bowen's patients were fixed as soon as they walked in the door, such was their faith in TB. Referred to TB by Keith Davis.



## **Jessie (nee McLean) Bowen**

Wife of Tom Bowen. The backbone of the Bowen family, contending with her husband's long term business relationship and friendship with another woman in a time of very conservative values.



## **Rene Horwood**

Tom's close friend and receptionist/helper. Credited as having been the influence behind Tom Bowen's venture into bodywork full time. Worked with him for around 20 years.



## **Kevin Neave**

Chiropractor. Former farmer turned chiro. Observed TB over a period of a couple of years. Referred to TB by Keith Davis.



## **Deni Albrecht**

USA Bowen Therapy school Director who, with husband Milton (dec.) introduced the Rentschs to the USA market, then started own school. Inspiring lady.

## **Oswald Rentsch**

Observed TB over a period of a couple of years. Has spread his interpretation of TB's work all around the place. Very controversial claims to 'ownership' of Bowen's work through his school, Bowtech. Refused requests for interviews. Unfortunately I also received no response to my request for photo's.

## **Elaine Rentsch**

Wife of Ossie, the very controversial dominant force in the Bowtech camp.



**Eleanor Oyston**  
Prominent Bowen Therapy/  
massage personality with  
extensive orthodox medical  
science background.  
Specialising in cancer issues.



**Neil Skilbeck**  
Chiropractor.  
Responded to an open  
invitation to observe by  
Tom Bowen at a therapists  
meeting. Figures controversially  
in the story. He operates a  
Bowen Therapy school.



**John Coleman**  
Prominent Bowen Therapy  
personality/Naturopath who  
credits Bowen Therapy as  
playing a major part in his  
recovery from Parkinson's  
disease. Specialising in  
neurological/auto-immune  
issues.



**Agnes Shaw**  
Tom's youngest sister. Does  
not figure prominently but was  
helpful in some areas in adding  
to the story and providing  
great family photo.



**Howard Plummer**  
Former geologist turned natural  
therapist who has inspired the  
spread of free clinics treating  
disabled children in the UK.



**Russell Sturgess**  
Prominent former Bowen  
Therapy teacher/school owner  
who introduced concepts of  
the role of fascia to the Bowen  
world.



**Julian Baker**  
Having first studied Bowen  
in Australia, Julian initially  
established himself as a Bowtech  
coordinator/teacher before a  
policy bust-up forced him to  
set up his own school which  
emerged as Bowtech's biggest  
competitor in the UK.

## CONTRIBUTING INTERVIEWEES

**Ray Sharp** Former policeman who instigated award of appreciation for TB.

**Brian Smart** Prominent in establishment of Bowen Therapy associations. Has his own Bowen Therapy school.

**Bill Caldwell** Prominent sporting personality.

**Herb Jeffery** Former sports coach/administrator.

**Hazel and Stan Haines** Hazel's first contact with TB was as a little girl, visiting her grandfather's dairy where TB worked as a young man.

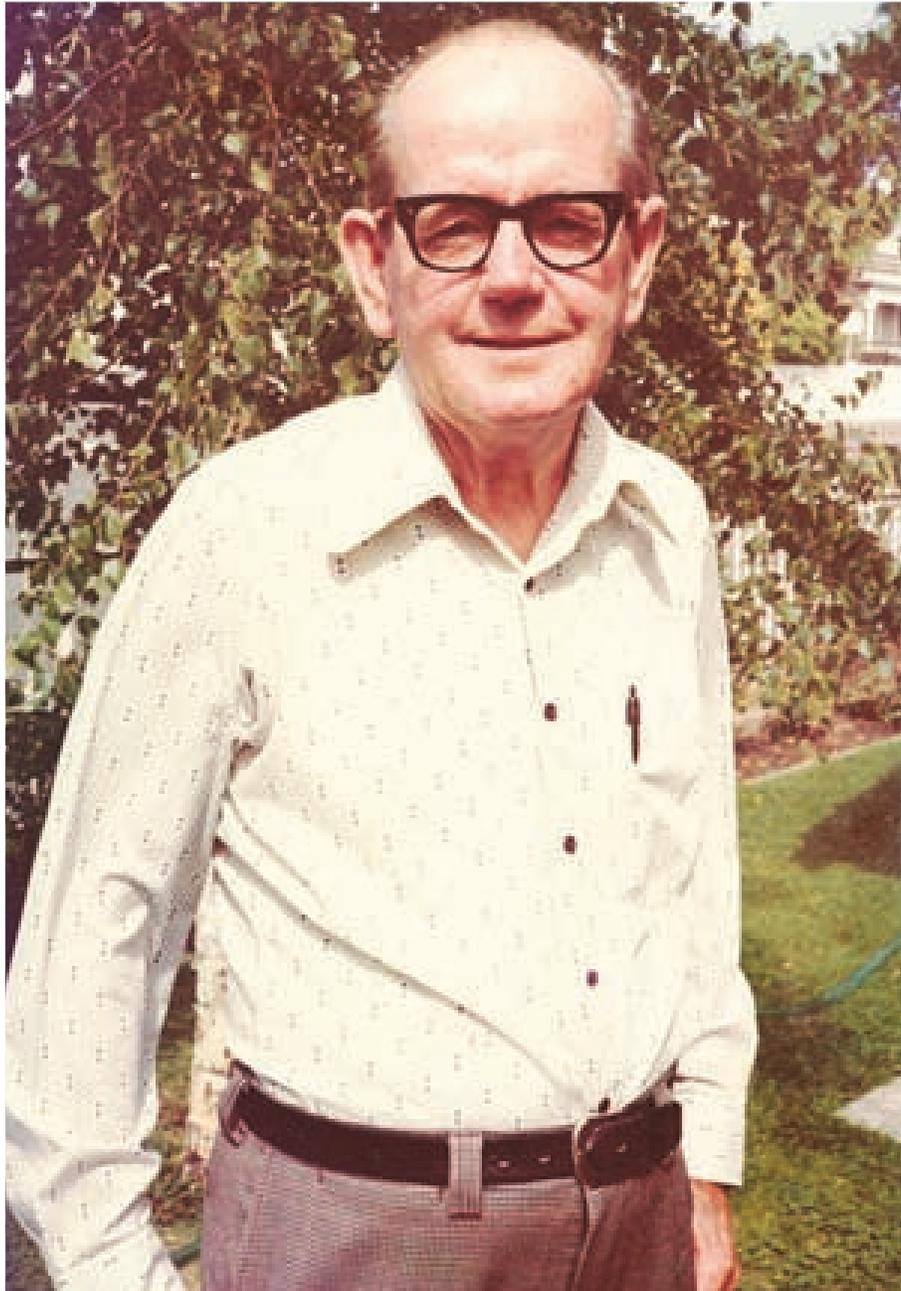
**Margaret Bilney** Former prominent sportsperson who provided some nice insights.

**Helen Wells** Former receptionist at TB's clinic.

**John and Lorraine Dale** Friends of the Bowen kids from childhood days.

**Alan Saunders, Geoff Saunders, Leonie Coy**  
Grandchildren of Ernie Saunders.

**Lester Cox** Therapist from regional Victoria. Quite a local legendary figure.



**Tom Bowen**  
(1916–1982)

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# Chapter One

## An Overview

In dealing with research into Thomas Ambrose Bowen my hopes had always been that he would eventuate as a squeaky clean knight in shining armour, tilting against the windmills of contemporary medicine and winning the day without a character blemish to taint the glint of his armour. This was, of course, a rather unreal expectation. But I've been pleased to discover that he was, at the very least, the type of man with whom I would have loved to have been associated. If I am to half believe what I have discovered, he was mostly a really, really nice man who had an exceptionally generous heart and spirit. And not just a little unique skill.

**Tom Bowen claimed** he started out in bodywork by observing others massaging sports people. He told this to a government enquiry in the early 1970s. Like other answers and explanations he gave in the interview conducted by the enquiry committee, Bowen's explanation of how he learned bodywork was, at best, vague. It gave no indication of the importance of the role that certain people and events played in his life. Many of the supposed facts about Tom Bowen have been generated from cursory glances at his interview. Many of his answers during the interview were, to say the least, very strange. Some just do not fit facts. We sift through this later.

This 'massage,' he observed some others doing could have actually involved a little more than a rub. This was a time of very talented 'self-taught' healers who, as we suggest later, may have had attachments to an ongoing line that stretches back hundreds, if not thousands of years.

It seems apparent that the pivotal time in Bowen's life was when he lived in Mount Dandenong on what is now the outer rim of Greater Melbourne. It was at this time that he met his wife to be, Jessie McLean, who lived in Ringwood, on the middle rim. I strongly suspect that this is when, in his early 20s, he became very involved in sporting clubs which led to him becoming exposed to some very famous healers in Melbourne. One was extremely famous in Australian football circles (and beyond), had travelled extensively and from these travels came across some little known, unique concepts of bodywork which he eventually introduced quietly into Australia. TB, it seems, was one of very few people to have been exposed to this work and more importantly, to have taken these concepts on board and run with them.

The recognition of this showed especially later in his life when, with his mentor having passed on many years before, Tom became eager to pass on his knowledge lest it be lost. Several people claim that TB expressed his fear that the work would not be carried on. He even issued a broad invitation to attendees at a natural therapists meeting in Melbourne to attend his clinic. He must have felt he was the last in the line working this particular way.

Having learned at least the basics of his mentor's technique and concepts, maybe a tad more, during the time as a young adult that he spent in Melbourne, he put his extraordinary diagnostic skills and unending curiosity to use and adapted what he'd learnt to suit whatever occasion arose. He did it really, really well, with large doses of compassion and commitment. His story tells of a long line of frustrations and a search to find himself, eventually doing so in the world of healing. But that too was not without its frustrations.

Bowen was one of a small group of unique healers of Post WW2 to the 1980s era in Victoria (also pre-war, but that's another story). Similar people would have existed in other States, other countries. A variety of well devised, thoughtful and often artful techniques/therapies have evolved from that period. However, *out there* are many opportunities lost, it would seem. Bowen's name could have so easily gone the way of most of his peers and just be a name under a fading photo or on an old honour roll. Now his name will live on, unfortunately with some controversy attached due to the ego and power issues of some who followed him, but always in the spirit of him being a worthwhile person who did worthwhile things.

**If we are to believe** conventional wisdom Tom Bowen had been busily making a decent name for himself over about 12 years before the first of a small group of people wandered along and observed him using his interpretation of the work he'd been shown. Any record of people observing Bowen before then is all but lost in the foggy mist of time. That does not mean they did not exist. They just missed out on all the fanfare and hullabaloo generated after TB's death.

There was the claim that only six men are recognised as having observed TB over lengthy periods. This became a major 'truth' in contemporary Bowen Therapy circles. Like many other of the supposed truths, it is not necessarily correct. There are some who claim to have seen Bowen's work interpreted in the middle '70s. And we found a woman who would have been known to TB through the alternative health profession, who claims to have spent lengthy periods observing him work and established a course to teach her interpretation of what she saw. And there is another man in particular who has raised

eyebrows and not a few hackles with his claim of observing TB. When we must, these people we call the Bowenwatchers.

It's from these people that ideas and interpretations of what we now know as Bowen Therapy have derived, developed and been hatched, all because TB didn't really 'teach' any of them. At different times he allowed a small number of people to watch him do the work he'd developed based on what he was shown, without fanfare or explanation. He answered the odd question and discussed a few things from time to time, but his actual anatomical understanding didn't match his extraordinary tactile abilities. He let his hands do the talking and those who watched, mostly, had to figure it out. Some have done it with better understanding than others. That is the way of things.

It has been said that requests to observe were made every other day. Given his reputation this would appear not to be too outrageous. Well, maybe a little. It's also been suggested that the majority of those actually allowed in the door as observers to enhance their professional careers were eventually asked to leave, sometimes after just one session. That's how the story has gone, but nobody has been able to support this with first-hand knowledge. It's another one of those image-building things. It seems very possible that not everyone would have taken to TB or him to them but that does not make the broad statement a fact. It's merely an assumption and serves to add to the legend that is Tom Bowen.

It's also been said that some people were puzzled by Bowen's fickleness and his apparent lack of sensitivity to their aspirations when asking to observe. To quote Natural Therapist/Osteopath, Kevin Ryan, "*...he believed that practitioners either had the gift to understand and learn his unique approach to muscular skeletal dysfunction through observation, or they did not.*" This quote, which comes up again for analysis later, is interesting in that it suggests that there was a standard by which TB judged potential observers. He may have had an informal standard such as, no bad breath, no swearing, a nice demeanor. But considering the fact that he issued broad invitations for people to observe him, the quote's based, I reckon, more on Kevin's admiration for TB than anything else; on how he would have wanted TB to be. It also serves to develop the image of those who observed TB as being special.

Kevin started observing just prior to TB having his first leg removed but was mainly there in the last year or two of Bowen's life – some eight or so years after the first of the acknowledged Bowenwatchers. I reckon Kevin's understanding of what TB was doing, as we'll point out later, is influenced by the logistical changes TB had to make after having had a leg removed.

Quotes like that above were not uncommon in the search for Tom Bowen. They're not necessarily based on reality but more on Bowen's mystique that has grown over the years, spurred on by the flurry of interest in the last decade or so. Flights of fantasy have taken wing with some people claiming extraordinary things, mostly based on how things may have been in the normal course of events. Many of the accepted 'facts' have been developed like this. There have been, also, extraordinary and puzzling claims that have Pinocchioed their way along over the years in the brief history of Bowen Therapy. There's lots of colourful stuff in the TB/BT story. It's a bodywork soap opera.

**Tom might have** answered a lot more questions from his observers had he not been hard of hearing, an issue which kept him from serving in WW2, despite being enrolled for a while. We scoured the National Archives to get his very interesting service record and the army history unit deciphered it for me. I'm not sure it doesn't ask more questions than it answers. It contained a hand written letter from TB.

Tom was from a family with involvement in the Salvation Army and this, in part, may help explain his wonderful generosity, such is the reputation of the Salvos. Among many other fine deeds, he often refused payment from those less able to pay. And his admiration for sports people often saw him providing free treatments. He was like that. His work was his passion. It brought him fame, it brought him pleasure, it brought him nowhere near as much money as it might have, and, to relay an oft stated line, it brought many people better health, often when other health carers had given up on them. Many of us who use manual techniques often come across people denied, ignored or given the bum's rush by medical people and, by thoughtful work, have been able to provide relief. So, while I would not suggest to compare to Tom, that statement is not totally indigenous to him. But it adds to the image creation that many of us have generated.

It's been suggested that TB dedicated his work with disabled children in his regular clinic to his granddaughter who passed on at age five due to complications from cerebral palsy. Establishing the clinic and treating carers too for free shows his extraordinary level of compassion.

All the while, his own health wasn't so great. Prior to starting out in bodywork full time, TB had a major health set-back. In (I believe) 1959 he suffered a collapse, generally referred at the time as a nervous breakdown, and was admitted to a mental health hospital. The reasons for the collapse and its consequences were many and varied. That he rose above this set-back to become such an important person in the lives of so many people is legendary. It's a great come-back story but not the only traumatic one he faced. This collapse was a pivotal time in

his personal life which may have led him to seek comfort with alcohol. He enjoyed, as several people told me, a whisky or two. This, according to anyone who had contact with him, affected no-one but himself. He still functioned well.

More major health problems were later in store for him. Unfortunately the Geelong hospital records that would explain the reasons for the removal of first one leg, then some time later, the other, have been destroyed. ‘Lack of circulation’ was the reason the family was given. Some have suggested diabetes as a cause but this is conjecture. He kept working after he’d had one leg removed then after having the second leg removed, while in hospital, he contracted an infection that he could not overcome. On 27 October, 1982 he succumbed to the infection. Chiropractor Kevin Neave summed it up: *“Absolutely sinful that a man of such merit died the way he did. Just sinful. Absolute bedlam.”*

**A few years after** his death one of his observers, Oswald Rentsch, put together a format of moves he claimed he saw Bowen do, then set about teaching it to anyone and everyone, eventually calling his work Bowtech (combining Bowen and Technique) and his school, The Bowen Therapy Academy of Australia. With wife Elaine, Ossie, as he’s known, is responsible for many of us even hearing about Tom Bowen. That he inspired a new direction for so many of us is a fact that we will always acknowledge and be grateful. But he wasn’t, by far, the first to formulate Bowen’s work into a ‘teachable’ system. There were several workbooks, or at least worksheets, around and had been so for some time by the time Rentsch put his initial workbook together. Had he seen them? He’s not saying but he at least knew others had been teaching. And well before he decided to do so. When Rentsch started teaching he was building on the (only limited) interest that had been slowly meandering around the back alleys of a couple of training institutions in Australia, particularly New South Wales, since the late ’70s to early ’80s. It had also made its (limited) way to New Zealand, I’m told.

To fulfil what he claims was a promise to TB to make his name known world-wide Ossie and Elaine took their course out of Australia, assisted in one instance by people who had trained in Australia and returned to their home country, and, in another, by family friends. With this support and very active, creative minds, the Rentschs initiated extensive interest in BT.

It would be fair to say that Ossie’s Bowen-Watching peers are very happy with his promotion of TB’s name but less than happy about his approach and his creative marketing claims. Bowen’s children,

to be frank, have been most unhappy with them. There have been claims that the Rentschs initiated much misinformation about Tom Bowen and their role with him. Later we have interesting quotes on this subject. And a plethora of confusing information generated by them. Unfortunately the Rentschs have not made themselves available to clarify the confusion or refute claims made against them, if, in fact, that is what they would wish to do. There's a great deal of controversy in this tale which is just as well as it makes a more interesting story.

These days there are many schools throughout the world teaching interpretations of Bowen Therapy and thousands of practitioners using the work, either solely, or as an adjunct to other techniques, or using other techniques as an adjunct to BT. It has become an important modality, often making inroads in areas where other manual techniques have failed to impact. But it still has a long way to go and the interaction between the Bowen world and orthodox medicine will need to be carefully and sensibly handled.

Not unusually, the ever-growing number of Bowen Therapists has, in Australia and England in particular, spawned the establishment of associations. In Australia the Bowen Therapists Federation of Australia (BTFA) is the national therapist-led, independent organisation and the Bowen Therapist European Register (BTER) in the UK, having started life as one school's club, has mostly evolved to be a similar organisation. The Rentschs started their own club, the Bowen Association of Australia (BAA), which appears to be fighting for a little independence these days, having been firmly under the Rentschs yoke for many years. Its sister organisation in the UK doesn't appear to see the need for independence.

There are many interesting and dedicated people doing very special work using BT. Cancer, neurological problems and disabilities are conditions in which certain people have specialised interest. Their stories add to the tapestry of issues in which BT is now involved.

Internet creativeness about TB and BT is difficult to ignore. So I haven't. A chapter on internet silliness gives some interesting examples. One site stood out as the most outrageous creative drivel. It's a good story though. And the author does spell Tom Bowen's name correctly.

**As I have delved** further into the life of Tom Bowen I have found I've had to deal with vastly contrasting emotions, one I had not expected being deep sadness as I found a man trying to live up to expectations of others then facing aspects of his life that I am certain he would rather have not faced but could not deny on both moral and emotional grounds. The disappointments in his life were many, not only the premature death of a grandchild and the inability to impress the

enquirers who might have afforded appropriate recognition, but also, before that, not being able to live up to his father's expectations, unreal as they were. Then there was his failing health. The nervous breakdown would have shaken him up and it must have been an emotional roller coaster ride when first he had a leg removed. This aspect of the story ends with huge joy when he was finally able to resume his role as healer, this clearly shown in the relaxed satisfaction that shows in his face in the photo of him working on the neck of a very young disabled girl. How must he have felt being able to help so many such children, especially at a time when there was little recognition that any help whatever could be afforded these (at the time) often discarded little souls? Contrasting with the sadness was the joy of the man's abilities and the obvious deep satisfaction he felt by being able to be of such marvellous service to so many people.

**This form of bodywork** we call Bowen Therapy is unlike most anything else around the place. It's useful for anything that any other form of bodywork claims it is useful for. And some.

There are many unique features of BT; the use of site specific single moves, particular move sets designated as nerve blockers or stoppers (more on that later), minimal work to achieve maximum effect. It's a very strange but, as a doctor friend told me, "*very clever*" system. Single moves, often with an emphasis on the origin, insertion and/or belly of a muscle, in designated points to suit the ailment presented, are often (but not always) performed in sets before the applicator usually allows the body to rest a little and respond to the work thus far. An experienced, well trained therapist will recognise when and for how long they should wait, if at all, responding to identified changes. There are also more rapid moves, sometimes flicks, over tendons and ligaments, also single moves as part of a set. There are, in fact, variations on these move descriptions usually depending on what is required for the receiver at a given time and the skill and understanding of the applicator. It's very strange stuff.

The single move is a little 'under the skin' one-way rub. The belief in Bowen circles, and I have no hesitation in agreeing, is that by instantly repeating the move at the same place, the effectiveness is often diluted. The single move is an uncluttered, unequivocal message to the brain. It often has a huge impact way above its level of input. Little input; big reaction.

Why does it work? There are some extremely interesting theories, ranging through a variety of space-cadet inspired explanations to very practical physiological impacts such as with the connective tissue membrane, the fascia, which is all-enveloping in our bodies. Despite the

minimal input system, BT impacts in a way that inspires structural, and often, visceral, imbalance correction. On viewing the technique for the first time, many therapists simply believe that any impact could only ever be superficial. It is, in fact, much more than that, often creating massive structural correction. It's a technique that seems to be fighting above its weight very successfully, often achieving corrections in the body that challenge belief. Research into the role of fascia appears to be explaining this phenomenon.

Some Bowen Therapists work gently with feeling and understanding, others work hard and fast, quite unnecessarily I believe. And again, there are a few variations in between. Good Bowen Therapists, who understand what they're doing and especially those with the ability to adequately assess a patient's problem and target those issues, then understand what has been achieved, will get excellent results. But I've seen some shockers who still claim to get results.

The understanding of the applicator usually depends on who taught them, though some people do develop different understandings, sometimes by misunderstanding and sometimes by understanding really well. It's a really, really interesting form of bodywork and it often plays a big part in resolving some very strange issues. It really deserves to have a lot of attention paid to it by orthodox medicine. Mainly because 'they' are missing out on a really good way to help more people than their restricted outlook allows them.

**Like many people** who use a technique which we believe is based on the work of Tom Bowen, I grew into the work on the back of colourful tales of ability, achievements and potential with nary a grey cloud to darken the horizon. Here was the healing technique to end all of man's pains. Here was a therapeutic tool that would change the course of world medical history. If you didn't get the desired result, it was your fault, your inability to do the work correctly. Many of us believed this fairy tale. At first. Despite clear evidence, some still do, but the reason for that is another story.

From the start, our initiation into the world of Tom Bowen was an eye-popping, jaw-dropping experience. Our story-teller was impressive. He told the stories from first-hand experience. He'd actually observed Bowen work and therefore knew all. Between Irish jokes and bright ties he acted out his part in his awe-inspiring play presented as part of a course of instruction in Tom Bowen's true and defensible technique. This was the way Tom did it and it could be no other way. There was no other way! "*Keep it pure, or heaven forbid, it will be lost to the world.*" And if you asked why you did certain things certain ways, you were told '*because that's what Mr Bowen did.*'

It didn't take too long for thinking therapists to realise that there was a whole lot more to this game than our tutor was letting on or able to let on.

Then a revelation. There was more than one person who observed Bowen work for a lengthy period. We discovered that we had not been told anywhere near the full story in the first place. This was puzzling. The facts were always there to be discovered. Why ignore them? Did the facts dent the validity of our initial tutor's story? They need not have.

Eventually it was 'discovered' that there were actually five other men, four of whom are still living, who had been part of the story. This then became the new truth and they, along with our original storyteller, were anointed as 'Tom's boys.' That was it. At that stage. At least we became aware that there were other stories to be told by other people about Tom Bowen, people who could legitimately lay a claim to having first-hand knowledge of the man and his work.

**In the context** of the planned research into Bowen and the therapy, discovering the 'truth' of the time that there were only six men worthy of classifying as legitimate trainees of Bowen's made things quite clear. I thought the job would be easy – straight forward. Interview the family, interview 'The Boys' and tell the story. Unfortunately it wasn't that simple. Or, as I now view it, fortunately it wasn't that simple. It could have been really boring just writing a biog. Very early in the piece I discovered that there was going to be just a little more to it all than I had envisaged. Like, from the first interview with one of the anointed 'six.'

Some interviewees were, under questioning, prepared to say what we should have known from the outset; that TB could not help absolutely everyone. But all were prepared to say that he had more than a good measure of wonderful ability. All were prepared to say that he was an exceptional healer with outstanding diagnostic skills and generosity and a will to help whomever he could to the best of his ability. To a man, they adored him. They thought he was special.

Not until they were pushed did any say anything that might be construed as negative about TB. Not until the hard questions were asked did they admit to possible flaws in the man's character or ability. With the questions asked, the response from the interviewee inevitably was softened by their admiration for the man. Yes, there were flaws. No, it did not matter. Nobody, except maybe the man himself, was worse off for his personal flaws.

He was no saint. Yet all those who spent time with him in a working capacity can attest to seemingly saintly miracles. Youngsters consumed with spasticity being able to perform some functions bordering on

‘normal.’ Sports people distraught with the belief that their injury was the end of the aspirations for them and their team for the season, or even their own aspirations for the future, being able to recover with lightning speed. Chronically painful back injuries that had not responded to ‘the best treatments around’ suddenly responding despite minimal input by the practitioner. Severe asthmatic bouts relieved without drugs. Miracles? Not at all. It was all perfectly normal. For Tom Bowen.

But there were, of course, those he didn’t/couldn’t help. Miracles aren’t for everyone. There was one osteopath in Geelong who claimed Tom sent his difficult clients to him. I’m not sure I was convinced but that may have been based on my desire for TB to be The Greatest. When asked about his success rate, TB told a government inquiry, *“I would have to be quite modest about this. I would say my success rate would be 88 per cent.”* Arriving at such a figure without accurate record keeping might seem a little questionable. But I’m convinced it was not his nature to boast. In fact, quite the opposite.

There are claims of ownership of Tom Bowen’s work. The idea is silly really. It suggests that he used a set formula of treatments. Some disagreed on what they saw him do for particular problems at particular times. One said that some interesting aspects of the technique as deemed by others, was rubbish. Others said they saw him do things that, on the surface, were outrageous – using pennies to create electrical currents where no visible source of power was evident, to identify the part of the spine where the problem emanated with a disabled person. There are suggestions of hypnotism and claims of the power of suggestion, that his presence developed a placebo effect with some people, that they were ‘healed’ as soon as they walked into his clinic.

So many variations of ‘truth.’ Yet all are true – more or less.

When there are so many variations, where do you begin? A good place is at the start. Forget what’s gone before, start from scratch and question every accepted fact as it arises.

**Tom Bowen’s bodywork career** began in Victoria, Australia, and it’s here that the overall focus is directed. It’s always been assumed among many assumptions that his bodywork activities started in Geelong, near Melbourne. I don’t believe this was the case.

Previous attempts at addressing the history of Tom Bowen and the therapy he has inspired have always appeared in the form of starting with Tom Bowen, maybe with a mention of contact with a few of his peers, but invariably he was cited as the initiator, as if suddenly a marvelous gift was bestowed upon him to alleviate human suffering. To imagine that he suddenly had an epiphany that produced such a

radical approach to bodywork is too fanciful. He had no background whatever from which to draw the required knowledge.

We have some documentary evidence pre-WW2 where the influence began and this proves an important factor. But our main emphasis is with the forties and fifties. It was a time when an unassuming, compassionate young man explored his interest in healing. Initially it was a modest part-time beginning, but nonetheless a beginning. Had he known then that he was lighting a spark that now burns within thousands of therapists around the world, he might have balked at the concept.

I have endeavoured to present BT in the context of its place in the world. And, having the opportunity, I've also scouted around the edges to present a broader view of the world in which Bowen Therapists exist; their expectations and disappointments, their helping hands and hindrances. And often their unbridled enthusiasm for the work which sometimes allows their minds to run riot with expectation and, unfortunately, fantasy.

But first we need to build the field and look at the land of Oz.