

## Ian (Morrie) Morris

By Peter Barr, President, Northern Territory Bar Association



Ian McDonald Morris was born in Bombay (now Mumbai) of Scottish stock. The family returned to Australia when Ian was a young boy, but his earliest recollections were of his childhood in India. He was schooled in Sydney and then Adelaide, at Unley High School. He studied law at Adelaide University, where his contemporaries included Daynor Trigg SM, Sue Oliver SM and Richard Giles. Ian faced conscription by the Birthday Ballot during the Vietnam War, but received a reprieve when the system was abolished in 1972. He was a committed Whitlamite thereafter.

Ian became a barrister and joined William Forster Chambers in January 2005, but his relationship with the Northern Territory's legal profession and the Bar had started more than 20 years before.

Following his admission in 1977, Ian worked with Stratford & Co in Adelaide and it was there that he first developed what would become a recognized expertise in workers' compensation and insurance law.

Ian came to Darwin in 1983 to work for Mildren Silvester & Co. He shared a house with Steve Southwood, who at that stage was another young solicitor working for the firm. Ian moved on to work for Poveys, with Richard Giles and David Farquhar. Alison Lowrie worked for Poveys as an articled clerk at that time, and recalls that Ian always gave generously of his time to explain to her the concepts and mysteries of the law.

Ian went on to establish a Darwin 'branch' of the Adelaide firm Elston & Gilchrist, which subsequently affiliated with the national firm Hunt & Hunt. Ian was the principal and founding father of the firm in the Northern Territory. In that capacity, he assisted in developing the careers of many young practitioners, including Meredith Day, Bill Piper, Tanya Fong Lim, Stephen Walsh Jnr, Steven Smith, Peggy Cheong, Chris Osborne, Greg MacDonald and Eric Hutton. It was a mark of Ian's character that the support staff at the firm loved and respected him,



whatever his idiosyncrasies as a boss might have been.

Under Ian's leadership, the firm acted for both plaintiffs and defendants without fear or favour. The firm was prepared to take plaintiff matters on a speculative basis, even where the road to judgment was likely to be long and hard, and even where doing so was likely to attract the ire of insurers who might otherwise be a lucrative source of work to the firm. The matter of *Costa v Sortino & Anor* [2000] NTSC 66 was just one example.

Also under Ian's leadership, the firm subsumed the firm Waters James & McCormack, and the full extent of the assistance he provided to Garry Schneider and his family over the final years of Garry's life, and following his death, is known only to them.

As a consumer of barristers' services, Ian was often a very vocal critic, as we (or many of us) reminded him when he crossed the battle lines and joined us as a barrister colleague in 2005. The fact, though, was that throughout his solicitor's days Ian always enjoyed close affiliations with many members of the Darwin Bar, particularly Trevor Riley QC, and later with Michael Grant QC, whom he affectionately called "The Pope" or "Il Papa".

At the Bar, Ian developed a very successful practice, but still made himself available to the litigant with a worthy case but no funds. He took matters on a *pro bono* basis. His conduct of



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one matter in the Federal Court on behalf of a group of native title claimants came about at the specific request of Justice Mansfield who considered that Ian's commonsense, legal acumen and understanding of human nature equipped him particularly for the role. His Honour is an astute judge of character.

Ian also devoted a great deal of his time to activities in the law which we all regard as very important but which are either not remunerated at all, or not very much. He was active on the Council, and went on to serve for two years as a very effective President of the Law Society Northern Territory. He also served as Chair of the Agents' Licensing Board and of the Legal Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal.

I should mention that Ian supported charities, in particular, Variety (to whom he even donated Miss Daisy, his trusted old metallic lime green Mercedes), the Heart Foundation and Kalumburu Community School. I mention them because Ian would never have done so himself.

Ian was a man of many and varied interests. His love of

popular music, and particularly that of Bob Dylan and the other '60s folk poets, and Johnny Cash, was familiar to all who spent any time with him. He was obsessed with military history and hardware. He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of ornithology, and he made many enduring relationships conducting bird watching expeditions. It was on one such expedition that Ian's long friendship with Justice David Angel began. Ian became a passionate golfer in the last ten years of his life. It gave him much joy and a shared interest with his wife Jill which (contrary to the expectation of anyone who has played golf with their spouse) only served to deepen the relationship. Ian also revelled in the ephemera and inconsequentialities of life. On one day mondegreens would take his fancy, and be the subject of exhaustive examination and discussion; on another day it might be limericks, or a particular computer game, or something else that had piqued his curiosity.

For his last several years, Ian took up the cause of protecting himself, Jill and all other Darwin residents from the potentially catastrophic adverse effects of the Darwin Waterfront project.

He more or less successfully advocated for the developers to be held to their assurances about building heights; he sought and got protection from the dust and disruption of lifestyle which occurred during the lengthy construction period; and he actively campaigned for effective noise control from proposed licensed premises.

Ian was a complex man. He was highly intelligent, yet had no intellectual pretension. He was a generous colleague, even with his tendency not to easily forgive and forget. Depending on the issue, and the person, his feathers could stay ruffled for quite some time. Some very funny stories were told at his memorial service about lengthy periods of 'no speak', followed eventually – generally – by reconciliation.

Ian's keen wit and great sense of humour made him most engaging company. A loving husband, a loyal friend to many people, a principled lawyer, and a man of conviction – he was all of these, with a big presence to match.

Administrator Tom Pauling AO QC wrote to the Bar Association shortly after learning of Ian's death, to express deep sympathy, to acknowledge Ian's great and passionate contribution, and to pose the same question Hamlet had asked Yorrick – "*Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? No one now to mock your own jeering?*"

That pretty well sums it up. }

