



*Left: Gavan Breen – 2007 (Northern Territory News)  
Right: Gavan Breen – 2016 (Northern Territory News) <sup>1</sup>*

I always have a glance through the major Australia Day honours list and, on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2016, I was just so pleased to see that Alice Springs based linguist Gavan Breen was one of 45 Australians to receive the prestigious Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) - in his case for distinguished service to the Indigenous community through the preservation of languages, to the development of orthographies, and to education.

This award was significant for the local Victorian racewalking community as Gavan had been a long standing member of the Victorian Amateur Race Walkers' Club and of the Melbourne University Athletics club during the 1960's and 1970's. I trained with Gavan when he was a member of the Linguistics Dept at Monash University in the early 1970's and I raced against him on many occasions during the latter part of his walking career. He is remembered especially for his Dunlop Volley sandshoes with the toes cut out and for his never-say-die attitude to racing.

Gavan was born at St Arnaud in the Wimmera district of Victoria on 22 January 1935. He received his secondary education at St Patrick's College, Ballarat (1948–1952), where he matriculated as Dux in his final year. He went on to study at Newman College, graduating as a metallurgist from Melbourne University.

While working in Tasmania in the late 1950s, he had dabbled with racewalking, competing in a couple of national championships, but without raising any eyebrows. When he moved back to Melbourne in late 1959, he joined the Victorian Amateur Race Walkers' Club and the Melbourne University Athletics Club and his racewalking blossomed.

His best years were in the early 1960's when he was a regular place getter in Victorian Championships over all distances, second only to the likes of internationals Noel Freeman, Bob Gardiner, Ted Allsopp and Peter McCullagh. With MUAC team mate McCullagh, he spearheaded Victoria's strongest club team which regularly won the coveted VAAA Teams events. During a 5 year period from 1960 to 1964, he won 5 Victorian silver and 9 Victorian bronze medals in individual championships. The list reads as follows

1960	10 Miles	Freeman, Noel	1.16.07.8	Allsopp, Ted	1.17.28	Breen, Gavan	1.20.27
1960	20 km	Freeman, Noel	1.31.05	Allsopp, Ted	1.36.16	Breen, Gavan	1.41.00
1961	10 km	Gardiner, Bob	47.18.0	Allsopp, Ted	47.34	Breen, Gavan	48.45
1961	10 Miles	Gardiner, Bob	1.17.43.4	Breen, Gavan	1.18.21	Allsopp, Ted	1.19.16
1962	10 km	Gardiner, Bob	47.24.0	McCullagh, Peter	48.55	Breen, Gavan	49.26
1962	20 km	McCullagh, Peter	1.38.28	Allsopp, Ted	1.38.44	Breen, Gavan	1.43.45
1963	20 km	McCullagh, Peter	1.36.28	Breen, Gavan	1.39.45	Allsopp, Ted	1.41.33
1963	10 km	McCullagh, Peter	48.52.0	Breen, Gavan	49.00	Marr, Norman	49.26

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.ntnews.com.au/news/centralian-advocate/alice-mans-crusade-to-save-indigenous-languages-honoured-with-oam/news-story/68da777bc377c5576089b3a6de034be7>

1963	10 Miles	Freeman, Noel	1.18.58.0	McCullagh, Peter	1.19.37	Breen, Gavan	1.22.31
1963	50 km	Gleeson, James	4.52.56.2	Breen, Gavan	5.02.23	Newmark, Varel	5.13.31
1964	10 Miles	Gardiner, Bob	1.18.47.4	Allsopp, Ted	1.19.04	Breen, Gavan	1.20.55
1964	10 km	Freeman, Noel	43.44.4	Gardiner, Bob	47.42	Breen, Gavan	48.25.6
1964	2 Miles	Freeman, Noel	14.00.4	Gardiner, Bob	14.36.2	Breen, Gavan	14.54.6
1964	20 km	Freeman, Noel	1.32.06	Breen, Gavan	1.39.30	Hancock, Alan	1.45.10



*Gavan (left) with the other placegetters in the 1961 Victorian 10,000m Track Walk Championship in Melbourne*

Gavan said his fascination with indigenous languages was triggered when he sat in a public lecture at Melbourne University in 1967. “The lecturer said a lot of languages were dying out and they were trying to get as much as possible recorded before it was too late. I thought, ‘that sounds like a good way to spend a holiday’. I had always been interested in languages and anthropology.”

He was awarded a scholarship to do a master's degree at Monash University, working initially with the last speakers of the Warluwarra language, and later with the Woorabinda people, before deciding that this was where his vocation lay. He was appointed a research fellow at Monash, and there worked on the Bidjara and sv:Gungabula languages and Pitta Pitta with Barry Blake. <sup>2</sup>

Over the next decade, his life outside walking took more and more of his time and he would disappear for months on end, travelling to the remotest outback areas with his tape recorder and note books as he sought to record the various indigenous dialects and languages before they died out. I remember him telling me that on occasions, he would record the last known speaker of a particular language.

Gavan's work extended over many distinct language groups in western and central Queensland, the Northern Territory and South Australia, and he has studied and recorded 49 such languages. <sup>3</sup>

Eventually he moved to the Northern Territory to continue with his linguistics work and has been based in Alice Springs for many years now.

<sup>2</sup> See [https://wikimili.com/en/Gavan\\_Breen](https://wikimili.com/en/Gavan_Breen)

<sup>3</sup> For a good summary of Gavan's wide ranging work, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gavan\\_Breen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gavan_Breen)



*Gavan on one of his many field trips in the 1970s*

The 1980s were spent training Aboriginal people to read and write their language to prepare for bilingual education. “It is just so different. You get groups that are closely related, descended from one earlier language, then you get others where two neighbouring languages are very different. I worked with a lot of languages where it was just the last one or two people. A lot of cases you work on a language and might get 300 words or 500 words – really good cases I would get over 1000 words.”

Gavan admitted that creating a dictionary for a particular language has its drawbacks. “It gets a bit tedious sometimes. You’ve got to listen and work out how they are pronouncing things and find a suitable way of spelling the language.”

His work in linguistics could be divided essentially into three main streams: salvage studies of a substantial number of now-extinct Australian languages, based on fieldwork with the last speakers; development of orthographies and literacy courses, and teaching vernacular literacy and other skills relevant to work in bilingual education programs, mainly in Central Australian languages; studies of Central Australian languages, including phonology, kinship and ethno-classification, but mainly directed towards production of dictionaries.

Indigenous language programs have faced government cuts in recent years, which Gavan said “wasn’t good”. “I get the impression governments take the attitude that they won’t put anything into the language, wait until it is almost gone and on its last legs. Then it is big news and ‘we are going to put X amount of dollars into this’.”

Gavan, who celebrated his 81<sup>st</sup> birthday on Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2016, couldn't have received a better or more well deserved birthday present than his AO, as his linguistics work spans almost 50 years. Despite being retired for nearly 20 years, he still toiled away voluntarily in an office at the Institute of Aboriginal Development on South Tce in Alice Springs. His lifework included preserving 49 Aboriginal languages through developing orthographies and teaching.

And he's was not ready to hang the boots up yet. The previous year, he had worked with numerous Native Title cases in Western Queensland as an expert witness. He had also just finished putting the final touches to a book on some of the last speakers of the Warluwarra language from the Georgina River district in western Queensland <sup>4</sup>. He was also active helping the local aboriginal people around the Alice Springs camps, his work extending into the social sphere as well.

One amongst the many languages he has catalogued and preserved is the Arrernte language, spoken by the original aboriginal custodians around the Alice Springs area. In this context, he published the definitive "*Arrernte: A Language with No Syllable Onsets*" in 1999 <sup>5</sup>.

A significant point was reached in 2014 when his huge collection of field notes was finally digitised and made available online <sup>6</sup>. But the job did not end there and Gavan continued to work in the field in which he had spent close to half a century. You would find him, with his reel-to-reel, in his cluttered office at the Institute of Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs.

Of the enormous significance of his painstaking work, he was typically understated. "There's been growing interest (in

4 See <http://central.batchelor.edu.au/project/warluwarra-stories/>

5 See <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/002438999553940#.VqcBQyp97IU>

6 See <http://www.rnld.org/node/388>

retaining language) over the years, from descendants mainly. This should help give them more to work with."

Gavan maintained his love of walking. This photo, taken in 2010, shows him finishing the that year's Alice Springs King of the Mountain walk.



Gavan may be long gone from his Victorian haunts but we remember him fondly and are proud to see that he went on to fulfil such an important role in Australia's ongoing reconciliation with our indigenous people.

Father Time eventually caught up with Gavan last week when he died, aged 88 years. His nephew William tells us his last days were comfortable and he passed away with his family around him.

Sleep comfortably old mate.

Tim Erickson  
10 October 2023