

TOM BYRNES – QUEENSLAND LONG DISTANCE WALKER: 1883-1973



I recently saw a photo, posted on the one of the Centurion facebook pages, of 3 Queensland walkers who had broken the record for walking from Brisbane to Ipswich in 1921. ¹ The walkers in the photo - R. F. McMurdo, Tom Byrnes and Harold Parcell - were already known to me from previous researches but the photo was one which I had not seen before. This led to a number of conversations with Tom Byrnes' great grand daughter Min and eventually led me to publish this resume of his walking exploits.

Thomas A (Tom) Byrnes, was born in Toowoomba, Queensland, in October 1883. He joined the Queensland Railways in 1907 and was classed as a guard in 1910. He continued in this role for his entire working life, clocking up 40 years of service on a variety of different lines and in a variety of different locomotives. This is a whole story in itself and is captured very well in the Boddy Family History website. ²

As a young man, Tom was a keen sportsman, competing initially with the Kangaroo Point Harriers cross country team, then doing stints with the Toowoomba Harriers and with East Brisbane Harriers.

1909 was a particularly significant year for him as it was his first year attempting longer distances. The Australasian T&F Championships were to be contested in Brisbane in August, with the first ever Australian Marathon Run Championship on offer. Tom was one of a large number of locals who contested the event which was from Brisbane to Sandgate and return, and he finished 17th in a time of 4:18:00. ³ On the basis of that run, he was invited to represent Queensland in the inaugural Victorian Marathon Championship (from Frankston to Princes Bridge in Melbourne) in October. He also completed this race, finishing 28th in an improved time of 3:56:52. ⁴

There is a great photo of the field which is reproduced on the next page. ⁵ Tom is definitely in there somewhere, along with prominent Victorian walkers Jack Lewis ⁶ and Bill Murray, ⁷ both of whom I have written about separately and both of whom will feature again later in this discussion.

1 See <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=10240584787541630&set=pcb.10162794632185805>

2 See <https://boddylines.com.au/02%20Family%20History/BYRNES%20section/Individual%20web%20pages/Byrnes-Thomas.htm>

3 See https://athletics.possumbility.com/aust_road_marathon/marathon-1909.htm

4 See <https://ausrunning.net/marathon/victorian-championship-1909/1>

5 See <https://blogs.slv.vic.gov.au/our-stories/ask-a-librarian/from-frankston-to-melbourne-on-foot/>

6 See <https://www.vrwc.org.au/tim-archive/articles/wv-jack-lewis.pdf>

7 See <https://www.vrwc.org.au/tim-archive/articles/wv-bill-murray.pdf>



1909 Victorian Marathon field

After that brief foray into longer distance running, Tom resumed his shorter distance running career which was soon disrupted by some significant events – getting married in 1913 and seeing Australia enter the First World War in 1914.

Here it would be remiss of me if I were not to acknowledge the effects of World War I on all Australians. It cost the lives of many athletes as well as many potential athletes who had yet to make their marks on the sporting world. Competitions did continue in Australia during the war years although it was more the way of school meetings and local carnivals. State Championships were shut down in most states and no national championship was scheduled until 1920.

As a guard on the essential train services, there was no pressure on Tom to enlist. He could do his bit for the war effort on the local front, helping keep the transport system going.

After the Great War finished, life gradually returned to normal and in 1920, it is recorded that he won the Queensland Country Championships 880 yards title for his club Boonah Harriers. That same year, he went to Adelaide and ran third in the South Australian Marathon Championship.

“Early in 1920, I received an invitation from Adelaide to compete in the first South Australian marathon championship. I mapped out a quiet seven-mile course and trained on this track for about seven months. I went to Adelaide in August on my annual leave. There was a strong Victorian team, and after leading for about 10 miles, I had the honour of finishing in third place, behind Percy Collins (Melbourne) and H. Walters (Adelaide). I received a beautiful gold medal and this is one of my most cherished trophies.”

In 1921, he was transferred back to Brisbane and joined Rochlea Harriers, then a force in cross country and long distance running and race walking. Tom took up walking with success, with a style that was never in doubt.

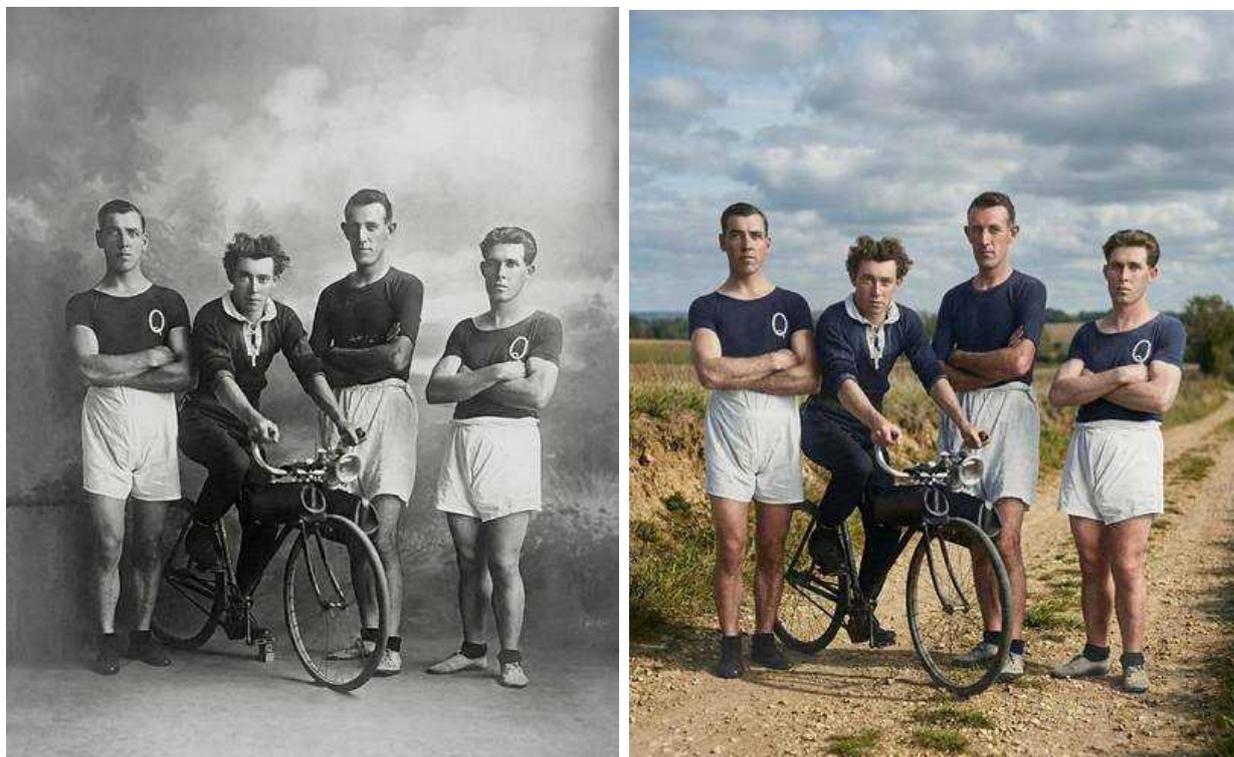
His first long walk from from North Quay in Southport, in company with R. F (Bob) McMurdo and Harold Parcell, of Rochlea Harriers. On that occasion, they created a record, completing 58 miles in 12½ hours. The other two were well known athletics figures in their own right. Parcell won the Queensland cross-country championship on four occasions, two of the distances being 10 miles over open country. McMurdo did a number of very impressive long distance walks and would win the 1927 Australian Marathon Championship in Sydney.

There was a growing interest in long distance walking at that time and there were several parties of walkers who, on different dates in 1921, attempted to lower the Brisbane to Southport record of 13 hours 28 minutes. Fresh from their Southport walk earlier that year, Byrnes, McMurdo and Parcell decided to try their luck with their own walk from Brisbane to Southport, a distance of just under 50 miles.

The following snippet from the Sports Referee newspaper in Brisbane, dated Saturday 29th October 1921, tells the story

*WALK TO SOUTHPORT
THREE EARLY" MORNING STARTERS*

Messrs. H. Parcell (Queensland cross country champion), Bob McMurdo, and Tom Byrnes, three well known Ipswich athletes and members of the Rocklea Harriers, were making an attempt during the weekend to lower the Brisbane to Southport walking record established by C. A. Gilmour (Thompson Estate Harriers) recently. A start was made at 2.30 o'clock this morning from North Quay, Mr. J. I. Brown, hon. sports secretary of the Q.A.A.A., sending the men away. The competitors, who were accompanied by Mr. D. Thomas, of Boonah, on a bicycle, set out at a brisk pace, reaching Fiveways, Woolloongabba, in 18 minutes. Stone's Corner was passed at 3 a.m., Mount Pleasant at 3.17. R. F. McMurdo covered the full distance in 10 hours 15 minutes, Harold Parcells in 10 hours 16 minutes, and Tom Byrnes in 11 hours 13 minutes.⁸



*The Brisbane to Southport record breakers – R. F. McMurdo, Dave Thomas (bike), Tom Byrnes and Harold Parcell
Two photos – the original on left and an AI-assisted heritage restoration on the right.*

Victoria and South Australia soon put on their own 25 Mile Walk Championships and NSW eventually came to the fore with its own 50 Mile Walk Championship.

Tom journeyed to Melbourne in September 1922 to compete in the first of these post-war long walks, a 25 Miler around the Richmond Racecourse. The first two places were taken by local walkers Jack Lewis and Bill Murray who had both competed alongside Tom in the 1909 Victorian Marathon. Tom finished 6th with a time of 4:47:00.

1922 Victorian 25 MILES WALK, Richmond Racecourse, Saturday 23rd September

1. Jack Lewis	EMH	4:12.19
2. William Murray	Melbourne	4:21.50
3. Ted Drayton	Footscray	4:23.10
4. Ernest Harrison	England	4:19.29 (1 lap or 880 yds short)
5. Jack Horan	North Melbourne	4:28.31
6. Thomas Byrnes	Queensland	4:47.00

Tom returned to Melbourne in September 1923, along with Harry Parcell to compete in the Olympic test marathon run of 26 miles from Frankston to Melbourne. Parcell took second place and Tom finished in seventh place with 3:33:00 and won the President's Trophy in the sealed handicap. He was by then 40 years of age.⁹

He also journeyed to Adelaide that year, placing second in the 25 Miles Walking Championship of South Australia.

In September 1925, he travelled to Melbourne once again to contest the Victorian 25 Mile Walk Championship, finishing fifth (time unknown).

⁸ See <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/284867423>

⁹ See <https://ausrunning.net/marathon/victorian-championship-1923/1>

In 1926, the thought of an inaugural NSW 50 Mile Walk Championship in Sydney was something that Tom could not ignore. Of the nomination of 26, only 12 competitors were at the Sydney G.P.O at the time of starting, and of these 12, only 8 finished the full distance. The race was won by Victorian Jack Lewis, with NSW walker Gordon Smith second. The winning time was claimed as a new Australasian record although, being a road event, it could not really be forwarded as an official record. Rather, it was an unofficial road best time. Tom finished 7th with 10:35:47, not too bad for someone of 43 years of age.

1926 NSW 50 Mile Walk Championship, Sydney to Blacktown and Return, 18th September 2026

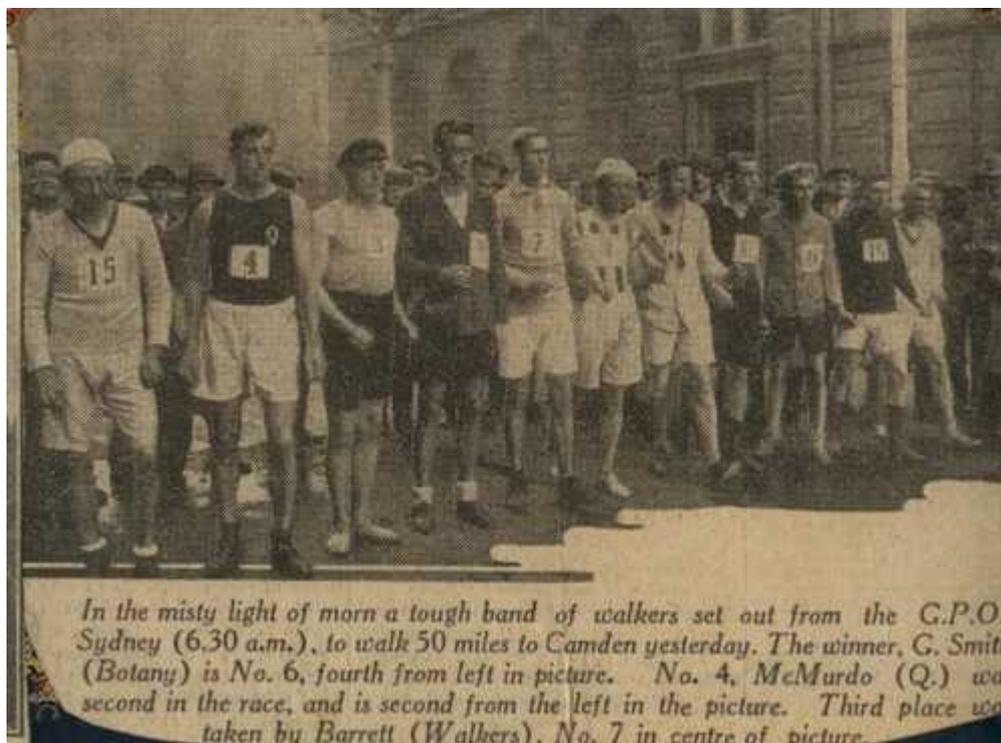
1. Lewis, Jack	VIC		9:20:24 (Australasian Best)
2. Smith, G. A.	NSW	Botany Harriers	9:34:14
3. Barrett, H. W.	NSW	NSW Walking Club	9:38:42
4. Hingston, R	NSW	St George Amateur Ath Club	10:03:05
5. Pollard, W. S.	NSW	NSW Walking Club	10:18:10
6. Winstanley, R. F.	NSW	Botany Harriers	10:24:50
7. Byrnes, T. A. B.	QLD		10:35:47
8. Harper, A. W.	NSW	St George Amateur Ath Club	10:43:00

In 1927, Tom had a quiet year but this was not the case for his training mate McMurdo. The following extract, dated 1927, is taken from the book *Athletics in Queensland*.

Undoubtedly the performer of the year was walker R. F. McMurdo of Rocklea Harriers. The 1927 / 28 Annual Report recorded this tribute to his performances

"It is with pride that we record one of the finest athletic performances ever registered by a Queensland representative. We refer to the win of R. F. McMurdo (Rocklea Harriers) in the Marathon Championship of Australia and New Zealand, held in Sydney on August 27 1927. There were 25 starters, including many proven Marathon runners in this historic race, Tasmania, New South Wales and Queensland being represented. McMurdo ran a heady race and, finishing strongly over the last mile, won comfortably from H. Hayden (NSW) in 3 hrs 6 mins 23 secs.

With only a week's rest after his gruelling marathon, McMurdo finished second in the 50 miles Walking Championship of NSW, his time being 9 hrs 34 mins 6 secs, only 17 minutes slower than the winner G. A. Smith (NSW). All members of the Association join in extending to Mr. McMurdo heartiest congratulations on his wonderful performances, and trust that he will long continue to be a tower of strength to the Association."



The start of the 1927 NSW 50 Miles Walk Championship in Sydney

When the Victorian Amateur Walkers' Club drew up its winter racing fixture for 1928, two new events were included on the program – a 50 Mile roadwalk from Melbourne to Frankston and Return on 25th August and a 24 Hour Test event at

the Amateur Sports Ground in Melbourne on 8th September. In recent years, the longest race on their yearly calendar had been over 25 miles and, such was the success of the 1927 edition, the committee decided that, if sufficient financial assistance could be obtained, they would carry through with these 2 new events. As it turned out, the scheduling of 2 such events proved overly optimistic and the calendar was eventually amended to show one ultra distance walking event for the year, a 10 Hour Race at the Motor Drome. This led to the following press release in Queensland where there was at least one disappointed walker!

Tom Byrnes, the Queensland endurance athlete, is down in the dumps. He intended to compete in the Victorian 12 hours' endurance event for walkers. Now 'tis said that the event may not be held. Byrnes is a regular competitor in such events and thinks nothing of journeying 1000 miles or so to take part. There was some talk originally of a 24-hours' test and this event interested Byrnes most. "Twenty five miles would be no test at all," he writes. "It is a mere sprint, and one hardly gets warmed up. But in regard to a 24 hours' test I would willingly walk to Melbourne for the privilege to taking part."

Byrnes is well over 40 years of age, is more than 6 feet tall and weights 12.0 in hard condition Tom and his friend Harold Parcell, a former marathon champion, train all the year round, and go on long jaunts together. On returning from a 20-mile walk, they don the gloves and set to for a few rounds. Parcell, Byrnes informs me, boxes very well.

History shows that Byrnes did not travel to Melbourne for the 10 Hour Walk at the Motor Drome in Melbourne Olympic Park, a sloping concrete track used for cycling and other sports that had been erected around the outside the Olympic Park grass track in the 1920s. Presumably, the thought of competing on such an alien surface did not appeal to him. As expected, Victorian ace Jack Lewis won with a distance of 53 mls 350 yds (with a 50 Mile split of 9:24:04).

Since Melbourne was no longer on his agenda, he and Bob McMurdo returned to Sydney for the 1928 NSW 50 Miles Championship, where his time of 10 hrs 42 min 54 sec earned him fifth place in the race, which went from Penrith to Rooty Hills and Return.



The start of the 1928 NSW 50 Miles Walk Championship in Sydney Tom Brynes is the tall walker third from right. Winner Gordon Smith is third from left. Bob McMurdo is on the far right.

In 1928, the Ipswich Harriers were formed, with Tom was one of the founding members.

On October 19th 1929, Tom celebrated his 46th birthday by setting another Queensland best time. The Truth (Brisbane) newspaper of Sunday 20th October reported the feat as follows

LONG WALK

On Saturday morning, October 19, 1929, at 1.30 a.m., well-known Ipswich athlete, Tom Byrnes, accompanied by Len Jones and Edgar Jones, left the G.P.O., Brisbane, to walk the 24¾ miles to Ipswich. The party reached Rocklea

at 2.43 a.m., Oxley Hotel 3.20 am., Goodna 4.40 a.m. and arrived at the Ipswich Post Office at 6.40 a.m. The total time was 5 hours, 10mins. Time was lost on the section from Dutton Park to Yeronga owing to the new road being constructed, also on a section of road after passing Oxley Creek bridge. The walkers were accompanied by Mr. Alan McCabe on a bicycle. The previous best to date was made on July 10, 1924, by three Brisbane walkers, Messrs. Berghofer, J. Thomas, and E. Berghofer, who covered the distance in 5hr. 30Min.¹⁰

The 3 walkers were keen to repeat the feat the next year, as evidenced by this article in the Queensland Times of Thursday 6th March 1930.

*Amateur Athletics
Brisbane-Ipswich Walk*

*Last October Messrs Len and Edgar Jones and Tom Byrnes walked from G.P.O. Brisbane to Ipswich Post Office in 5 hours 10 minutes. As this is the best attempt made by amateur athletes, the same 3 men intend shortly to attempt to lower their previous time. As a team of three walkers they also challenge any three members of any club or clubs to a team's race of three walkers a side for points, over the above course, provided suitable trophies can be donated for each man in the team, and the teams to be members of a club registered with the Queensland Amateur Athletic Association.*¹¹

Alas, there were no challengers so the walk did not proceed.

Their time for the walk from Brisbane to Ipswich lasted for a long time. In March 1950, 29 year old Jack Burke, of Rocklea, attempted to break the Brisbane to Ipswich record. The paper reports that he covered the distance in 5 hours 30 mins, and is said to have lost 10lbs on the journey.¹²

Finally, the time was beaten in 1951 by well known walking identity Tom Daintry.¹³ It was reported as follows in the Truth (Brisbane) newspaper of Sunday 1st April of that year

Broke Walk Record By Nearly Hour

*Marathon and track walking champion, Tom Daintry, created new figures for the Brisbane to Ipswich road walking race yesterday, bettering State representative Tom Byrne's time by 53 minutes 15 seconds. He took 4 hours 25 minutes 45 seconds to cover the 24.5 miles. Dave Melzer, Rocklea, was 25 minutes further behind, with Harry Brooks a little over two minutes away in third place.*¹⁴

Tom continued to compete for a couple more years but, at nearly 50 years of age, it was time to retire.

I came to the conclusion that my athletic career should come to an end, after my race in the Australia 50 kilometres walk which was held in Sydney on September 6, 1930. I had been an active athletic for about 30 years, having been associated with three metropolitan clubs and three country clubs during my career. I had visited Adelaide twice, Melbourne four times and Sydney four times to take part in State championships. My trophy list comprises cups, gold medals, sashes, and others.

Tom was one of a number of Australian men who tested themselves out in long distance walks in the 1920s. Alas, they never had the chance to attempt a 24 Hour walk, as the first of these was not held until 1937, when Gordon Smith completed 110 miles in 24 Hours in Centennial Park in Sydney. With that performance, Gordon became Australian Centurion Number 1.¹⁵ Tom had well and truly retired by that stage.

Tom died in July 1973 in Brisbane, Queensland, aged 89 years. He and his wife Lily raised a family of 11 children who could be rightly proud of their father.

I have no doubt that Tom Byrnes, Bob McMurdo and Harold Parcell would all have become Centurions if the opportunity had presented. They were all strong walkers and good runners and had careers of which they could be very satisfied.

Tim Erickson
Secretary, Australian Centurion Walkers
Wednesday 7th January 2026

10 See <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/115988817>

11 See <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/115323822>

12 See <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/124651775>

13 See <https://www.vrwc.org.au/tim-archive/articles/wv-tom-daintry.pdf>

14 See <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/201437787>

15 See <http://centurions.org.au/centlist.shtml>