

IAN BRACKENBURY CHANNELL (42-45)

Otherwise known as The Wizard of New Zealand.

Much has been written about this most unusual OF and the biography at the foot of this article is excellent.

However, an article in the Spring 1996 OF Magazine includes a few additional pieces that may be of interest. He apparently converted Christchurch's Cathedral Square into a local equivalent of Speakers Corner in London. To begin with he was threatened with arrest but played a game of cat and mouse with the local authorities. He spoke wearing a gas mask (nobody could hear him). He spoke in gobbledegook. He pretended to speak but uttered nothing. He spoke in French and even a blackboard was employed.



Eventually the council capitulated since when, in black cloak and black pointed hat (see picture) he has become a major tourist attraction in the Square. Reuters News Agency described him as a national institution.

Some additional highlights of his wizardry not included below :-

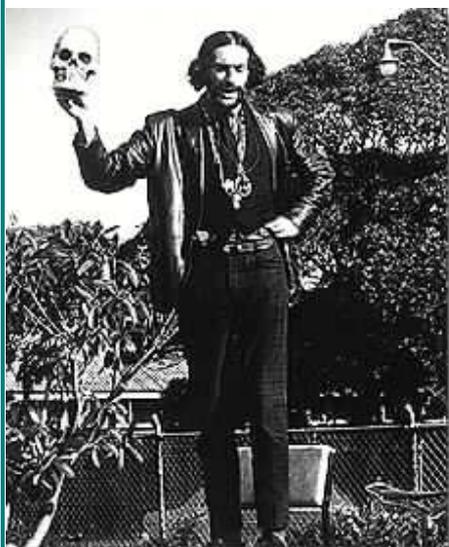
- To avoid the census, when he might have been forced to concede the name with which he was christened, he once rowed himself out beyond the 12 mile coastal limit for census day.
- On another census day he cast a disappearing spell on himself for the day. The court, to which he was taken, ruled that "the average man in the street would have decided that the Wizard was in hiding". Amazingly his fans, including parliamentarians, mayors, priests and the whole Canterbury Rugby team presented a petition to Parliament saying they believed he had truly vanished. Defeated, the statistics department decided not to pursue the matter further.

The biography below is from <http://www.milesago.com/People/peopleframe.htm>

Ian

Channell

aka "The Wizard"



Described by one reviewer as “politically, morally, aesthetically and intellectually incorrect”, the gloriously eccentric **Ian Brackenbury Channell** has been universally known as “The Wizard” since 1969. He is famous in New Zealand as the country’s only official Wizard, and he will be remembered by many Australian university students of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s as the resident Wizard at the University of New South Wales and as a Living Work of Art of the National Gallery of Victoria. Although conventionally dismissed by his critics as a lunatic, The Wizard’s career speaks for itself and he is remarkable for his imaginative pursuit of his own peculiar vision for an alternative lifestyle.

Ian was born in London, England on December 4 1932. He was educated at Framlingham College, Suffolk (1942-45) and Bromley Grammar School, Kent (1945-51). Between 1952 and 1954 (while presumably conscripted for National Service) he served as a Royal Air Force navigator. From 1954-58 he worked as a paper merchant’s representative in London, and from 1958-60 he travelled in the Middle East and taught in Tehran.

In 1960 Ian enrolled at Leeds University, Yorkshire (1960-63), where he gained a B.A. Double Honours in Psychology and Sociology. He migrated to Australia after gaining his degree and from 1963-66 he was a lecturer with the Adult Education Board, University of Western Australia, a Community Arts Organizer and Executive Director of the Festival of Perth.

Relocating to the east coast in 1967, he took up a post as a teaching fellow in the School of Sociology at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, and began a Ph.D. in the Sociology of Art. He soon became well-known for his unorthodox views, dress and behaviour. Growing bored with the constraints of traditional academia, he began exploring alternative modes of thought and social interaction. He gradually developed an entirely new identity for himself as “The Wizard”, together with a new world view that comprised a complex mixture of magic, esoteric philosophy, sociology and Situationist performance art. Tall, bearded, with long flowing hair, he dressed in a variety of outlandish costumes, and as the photograph above will attest, he undoubtedly stood out like the proverbial sore thumb on the UNSW campus.

Despite (or perhaps because of) its rather staid reputation, UNSW already had a history of creative dissent, and its often controversial student paper *Tharunka* was well-known for its irreverent attitude; it is also famous as the training ground for Oz lynchpin Richard Neville and investigative journalist and activist Wendy Bacon.

During his tenure at UNSW Ian founded the student group The Blackguards, which was succeeded by ALF (Action for Love and Freedom). The irreverent antics of The Wizard and his followers were detested by the more serious and politically-minded in the student body, especially members of the left. Ian had no interest in conventional politics and evidently regarded the so-called “radical” left wing of student politics with disdain.

However, Ian's colourful lifestyle explorations drew him further and further from his academic duties and matters came to a head in 1969 when the head of the Sociology Department, who was also his PhD supervisor, terminated Ian's thesis (on the grounds that he had made "insufficient progress") and dismissed him from his position as a teaching fellow. Thus began the first of a series of epic one-man battles with authority that are a feature of The Wizard's career.

But this seeming reversal of fortune led to the turning point in The Wizard's life and career. In a remarkable and generous decision, later in the year he was appointed as the official Wizard of the University of New South Wales by the Vice-Chancellor, Sir Phillip Baxter, and the UNSW Students' Union. In his own words, this enabled him to continue his "experimental teaching and social reform techniques" and marked "the beginning of a fundamentally new social role complex".

Discussing The Wizard in their 1991 book *Seizures of Youth: The Sixties and Australia*, authors Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett argue that he was appointed to this novel post simply as a means of defusing the conflict with the university over his sacking and the termination of his Ph.D, whilst simultaneously providing a non-threatening focus for student activities on campus. Indeed Gerster and Bassett seem only too eager to dismiss the vehemently apolitical Wizard as a mere stooge of the university administration, and they further marginalized him by ignoring his academic qualifications and – just as his Head of Department did – by questioning his sanity.

"A deregistered sociology student, Channel claimed to be researching "Tension Resolution Through Absurd Behaviour leading to Revelation of Mutual Interests" by "behaving absurdly in small groups". This, apparently, was sufficient reason for him the University of New South Wales to appoint him its first and only 'official wizard' in which occupation he chanted 'suitable incantations' at the investiture of the university's new vice-chancellor, Professor Rupert Myers. To such proponents of the youth movement as the irrepressible Oz editor Richard Neville, Channel ... was the 'wonderful wizard of Aussie' ... Bizarre behaviour was often credited with grandiose cultural significance in the 1960s. In truth, Channel acted as a conservative, stabilising force within the campus by diverting student energies away from political activism – for which the vice-chancellors who employed him were extremely grateful. Like many celebrities, there was a touch of the despot as well as the lunatic about the Wizard."

Just as his left-wing opponents did in the late '60s, Gerster and Bassett pour scorn on The Wizard's off-beat mode of dissent -- mainly, it would seem, because he showed no interest in aligning himself with any conventional political agenda. Conveniently, they ignore the fact that The Wizard has continued to wage his optimistic one-man war against normality and has carved out a unique position and identity for himself, long after his politically-correct critics abandoned their fashionable creeds and retreated to the comfortable bosom of the Establishment.

In 1970 The Wizard was appointed Wizard of World University Service (Australasia), continuing his "community experiments" at the University of Melbourne and between 1969 and 1973 The Wizard was a fixture at many 'happenings', underground and counterculture events around Australia.

In 1971 he appeared at the eight-day Aquarius Arts Festival in Canberra, where his declaration of The Fun Revolution was recorded by filmmaker Philip Noyce in his innovative twin-screen documentary film of the event, [Good Afternoon](#). From 1971-74 he donated himself to the National Gallery of Victoria as a *Living Work of Art* with the agreement of the Director and Trustees. He also founded the Imperial British Conservative

Party and taught and developed “a new Cosmology in special facilities provided by the University of Melbourne and known as the Department of Levity.” Nice work if you can get it.

The Wizard left Australia in 1974 and settled in Christchurch, New Zealand, where he generously offered his services as Wizard to the Christchurch City Council. His offer was at first declined, so The Wizard took it upon himself to speak regularly in Cathedral Square, where he became a familiar figure. It wasn't long before The Wizard was embroiled in another epic battle with authority, this time with the NZ Statistics Department, after he repeatedly failed to complete the compulsory four-yearly NZ Census form.

In 1979 the Director of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, contacted Melbourne and arranged a transfer of The Wizard's *Living Work of Art* title to the gallery in Christchurch. By now The Wizard was an established institution and in 1980 the Canterbury Promotion Council appointed the Wizard to the honorary position of official Archwizard of Canterbury. In 1980-81 the New Zealand Government Tourist Bureau arranged promotional visits by the Wizard to Melbourne and Sydney.

In 1984 a “miscast spell” for the Canterbury rugby team, who had not been beaten for many years, was thought to have resulted in their catastrophic defeat. The Wizard felt obliged to resign from his honorary position but The City Council and the people of Christchurch petitioned for him to return, holding a “Wizardathon” and establishing a Wizard Trust to assist him in the performance of his duties.

In 1988 he made world news by performing drought-breaking rain dance at Waimate Agricultural and Pastoral Show. Also that year he conducted yet another public battle against bureaucracy, this time against NZ Telecom, and he was successful in preventing them from carrying out a plan to paint all phone boxes pale blue.

In 1989 The Wizard was given the Newman Award for individual services to tourism in New Zealand and in 1990 he was officially proclaimed Wizard of New Zealand by the Prime Minister, the Honourable Mike Moore. He gained further notoriety for his famous upside-down maps of the world, which patriotically put New Zealand at the top.

In 1992 the Christchurch Ministry of Transport arranged a special Driving Licence for The Wizard and the British High Commission issued him with a customized passport in the name of The Wizard of New Zealand. The Wizard announced his engagement to be married - under special conditions of course. This ceremony was a highlight of Christchurch's first Festival of Romance for the Canterbury Tourism Council. Ten years on, The Wizard and his fiancée Alice Flett have yet to set a date for their marriage.

In 1993 The Wizard accompanied a delegation from Christchurch City Council on a “Sister City” visit to Adelaide, South Australia. After his controversial rejection by City Councils in the Auckland City area, The Wizard was invited by the Rodney District Council to end a serious water shortage by performing another rain dance. Three days later the skies opened and the city was deluged with rain for some months, although the subsequent flooding produced many letters of complaint. As a result of this success, The Wizard was invited by a Sydney radio station and the Tamworth Town Council to attempt to break a drought of many years. After three days storm clouds appeared and the rains came.

In September 1995, with assistance from the City Council, there was a week of activities to celebrate twenty-one years of wizardry in Christchurch. The celebrations included a retrospective *Living Work of Art* exhibition

in the city art gallery, a "hatching" from a giant egg, the construction of a large nest on top of the eleven-story University Library, and a Conclave of Wizards from Australia and various parts of New Zealand.

The Wizard's identity and his activities as a "living work of art" have also been recognised and discussed in the definitive survey of international contemporary art ARTODAY. In 1998 Canterbury University Press published the The Wizard's modestly-titled autobiography *The Wizard: My Life As A Miracle*, illustrated with numerous photographs and peppered with hilarious anecdotes.

Now nearing his 70th birthday, The Wizard announced in August 2002 that he intends to retire and is currently seeking a successor. "I will be happy to have a successor," he recently told the ABC. "It's a wonderful job. It's not commercial. You are not left-wing or right-wing. It's not like it's an athletic job. I do the odd rain dance, but that's about it."

"I'm too radical for any government grant as a tourist attraction. The tourist industry doesn't promote me any way. I am too hard a concept for simple-minded tourists. It is hard to get along with the bureaucrats. I get on quite well with the politicians, though."

But despite his unique tax-free status, even wizards need to eat and drink and The Wizard is supported by his fiancée, Australian Alice Flett.

"It fits with my post-feminist views - she supports me. I'm rather like a kept woman in that respect. I'm very lucky."

As Ms Flett is Australian, The Wizard may return to Australia after he retires. Until then he will keep pacing, preaching and provoking gasps and giggles in Cathedral Square, sporting his distinctive black gown, pointy hat, crooked wooden staff and bedraggled beard.



The Wizard as he looks today.