

# Flood

Heroic  
Queenslanders  
No. 5

By BEACHCOMBER

**SEVEN** thousand miles away from the scene of his heroism a plaque in Balliol, famous college of Oxford University, commemorates the courage and self-sacrifice of Richard Powell Francis, who gave his life in February, 1893, during the height of Brisbane's most devastating flood in the work of rescuing, at least, a score of people.

His name is indissolubly linked with the great school, Brisbane Grammar, of which he was a master and an original pupil.

In January, 1893, the Brisbane River had overflowed its banks and brought ruinous losses to Brisbane. That flood was followed by a more serious one in the opening days of February. The course of the Brisbane River is less than 200 miles, but it is fed by many streams, and in those days was heavily matted with coastal scrub.

This scrub imprisoned debris which banked up the waters so that their getaway was slow. Added to this sluggishness was a rainfall

such as has never occurred since. The rains which fell on or about the watershed of the Brisbane in early 1893 were more than abnormal. They were phenomenal.

The quoting of some rainfalls associated with the February flood will easily illustrate this point. On February 1, 1893, for instance, Yandina registered 20 inches of rain for the 24 hours.

During the following day Landsborough reported 15 inches. But the fall which startled not only Queensland, but Australia as well, was that recorded at Croyhamhurst in the Blackall Range, where 35 inches and 41 points were registered for the 24 hours, which established a world's record rainfall that, as far as has been recorded, still stands. This centre in the four days from January 31 to February 3 reported 77 inches and 31 points of rain.

Under the stress of such rains as these, the tributaries in the Brisbane watershed poured into the main stream such a colossal volume

of water as to make it impossible for it to reach the sea without bursting its banks over many miles.

The river had not been dredged to its present depth or widened, as it has been since at many points. The result was the inundation of the greater part of Brisbane.

The flood rose to 30 feet above its usual level at high tide. Old Victoria Bridge, which had been erected in 1874, consisting of 11 fixed spans and two openings crossed by a double swing-span for traffic was swept away.

Most of Queen, Creek, Adelaide, Elizabeth, Melbourne, and Stanley streets, among many others, were flooded and on the lower levels of the river banks the waters spread out like an inland sea. So powerful was the lifting power of the flood

that the gunboat *Gayundah* and the A.U.S.N. Co.'s 2000 ton steamer *Elemang*, which had been lifted from their moorings and deposited in the Botanic Gardens by the January flood, were washed back in the river bed by the February inundation.

Houses, sheds, trees, haystacks, and almost everything that would float were borne by the torrent towards the sea. One of the widest distribution of waters occurred in the Oxley district, which was under the flood for miles around. This isolated many families in homes built on rising ground or marooned them on roof tops or in trees.

**THIS** was the setting for the heroic labours of Dick Francis. From what we

know of him he would have been the last one to suggest that he was alone in the rescue work that characterised the disastrous floods. We do not know that his achievements were outstanding in his devotion through sleepless days and nights in the worst weather to the rescue of a large number of people.

Mr. Francis lived with his wife at Corinda in the old home built by his father, Mr. A. M. Francis, P.M., travelling daily back and forth to the Brisbane Grammar School. When the flood waters rose he launched his own small boat and began the work of rescue. Many people he reached just in time to save them from being washed from roof tops into the rising waters.

To others whose danger was not urgent he carried food. According to accounts published at the time this young Grammar School master could not have done what he did save for the fact that he was an athlete, a prominent Rugby footballer and cricketer.

Rain fell incessantly and his clothes were never dry.

Yet for three days and nights without ceasing, so urgent was the need of marooned people, so imminent the danger of many, that he took his little boat over the flood waters without stopping to sleep or even to rest, snatching a bit of food as opportunity offered.

It was stated that among those he rescued were some of his pupils from the Grammar School, where his popularity, already established, was enhanced and he became the

his popularity, already established, was enhanced and he became the hero of the college. Those whose recollection of the 1893 floods is clear say that there must be people living in the Oxley district to-day who owe their lives to the courage and devotion to self-imposed duty of Dick Francis.

His heroism led to his death. In his weakened condition a chill which he caught rapidly developed into pneumonia. The boys of the Grammar School were shocked to hear of his death, which occurred about three weeks later, on February 24. His funeral to the little family cemetery at Corinda was one of the largest that had been attended in Brisbane. Men who had been with Dick Francis as first students when the Brisbane Grammar was opened in 1869 joined with his own class pupils and the remainder of the then school to follow his remains to their last resting place.

He had not only been a scholarly master, but an inspiration to the boys in his many attributes, for although he was a graduate of Oxford it was in the tougher atmosphere of his native land that the character and physique of Dick Francis had been fortified.

Young Queenslanders of those days were bred hardy, and an early hint of the heroic quality which Dick Francis was to disclose in the floods was given when he was 14.

He shattered his thumb with a gunshot at Redcliffe, where his father had a property. He made his way over the 34 miles to Brisbane with his brother to the home of Dr. Prentice. To avert mortification and lockjaw the doctor amputated his thumb without an anaesthetic. Dick Francis thought nothing of that.

Brisbane Grammar School will always owe him a debt in that he collected and preserved in a little published work a complete record of the scholastic and sporting attainments of the historic school from 1869 to 1890. A copy of this valuable miniature history is preserved in the Oxley Library.

The winner of the first exhibition scholarship to Oxford Dick Francis made more history for Queensland. He was, in fact, the first Australian to graduate from the famous University, from which he returned with the degree of M.A.

**V**ISITORS to Oxford may see at Balliol a plaque which honours him with the following words:—

"In memory of Richard Powell Francis, the first Australian student at Balliol, who, by his unselfishness and public spirit in the college, by his work at the earliest settlement in East London, and afterwards as a master at Brisbane Grammar School, was an influence for good on many. He matriculated in 1870 and died in 1893, giving his life to help others in the great flood at Brisbane."

A brilliant student, a great athlete and an upright and courageous man, Dick Francis, long before the institution of the Rhodes Scholarship, is regarded as the very Anglo-Saxon type Cecil Rhodes later had in mind to help.



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