
Chapter One

An Overview

In dealing with research into Thomas Ambrose Bowen my hopes had always been that he would eventuate as a squeaky clean knight in shining armour, tilting against the windmills of contemporary medicine and winning the day without a character blemish to taint the glint of his armour. This was, of course, a rather unreal expectation. But I've been pleased to discover that he was, at the very least, the type of man with whom I would have loved to have been associated. If I am to half believe what I have discovered, he was mostly a really, really nice man who had an exceptionally generous heart and spirit. And not just a little unique skill.

Tom Bowen claimed he started out in bodywork by observing others massaging sports people. He told this to a government enquiry in the early 1970s. Like other answers and explanations he gave in the interview conducted by the enquiry committee, Bowen's explanation of how he learned bodywork was, at best, vague. It gave no indication of the importance of the role that certain people and events played in his life. Many of the supposed facts about Tom Bowen have been generated from cursory glances at his interview. Many of his answers during the interview were, to say the least, very strange. Some just do not fit facts. We sift through this later.

This 'massage,' he observed some others doing could have actually involved a little more than a rub. This was a time of very talented 'self-taught' healers who, as we suggest later, may have had attachments to an ongoing line that stretches back hundreds, if not thousands of years.

It seems apparent that the pivotal time in Bowen's life was when he lived in Mount Dandenong on what is now the outer rim of Greater Melbourne. It was at this time that he met his wife to be, Jessie McLean, who lived in Ringwood, on the middle rim. I strongly suspect that this is when, in his early 20s, he became very involved in sporting clubs which led to him becoming exposed to some very famous healers in Melbourne. One was extremely famous in Australian football circles (and beyond), had travelled extensively and from these travels came across some little known, unique concepts of bodywork which he eventually introduced quietly into Australia. TB, it seems, was one of very few people to have been exposed to this work and more importantly, to have taken these concepts on board and run with them.

The recognition of this showed especially later in his life when, with his mentor having passed on many years before, Tom became eager to pass on his knowledge lest it be lost. Several people claim that TB expressed his fear that the work would not be carried on. He even issued a broad invitation to attendees at a natural therapists meeting in Melbourne to attend his clinic. He must have felt he was the last in the line working this particular way.

Having learned at least the basics of his mentor's technique and concepts, maybe a tad more, during the time as a young adult that he spent in Melbourne, he put his extraordinary diagnostic skills and unending curiosity to use and adapted what he'd learnt to suit whatever occasion arose. He did it really, really well, with large doses of compassion and commitment. His story tells of a long line of frustrations and a search to find himself, eventually doing so in the world of healing. But that too was not without its frustrations.

Bowen was one of a small group of unique healers of Post WW2 to the 1980s era in Victoria (also pre-war, but that's another story). Similar people would have existed in other States, other countries. A variety of well devised, thoughtful and often artful techniques/therapies have evolved from that period. However, *out there* are many opportunities lost, it would seem. Bowen's name could have so easily gone the way of most of his peers and just be a name under a fading photo or on an old honour roll. Now his name will live on, unfortunately with some controversy attached due to the ego and power issues of some who followed him, but always in the spirit of him being a worthwhile person who did worthwhile things.

If we are to believe conventional wisdom Tom Bowen had been busily making a decent name for himself over about 12 years before the first of a small group of people wandered along and observed him using his interpretation of the work he'd been shown. Any record of people observing Bowen before then is all but lost in the foggy mist of time. That does not mean they did not exist. They just missed out on all the fanfare and hullabaloo generated after TB's death.

There was the claim that only six men are recognised as having observed TB over lengthy periods. This became a major 'truth' in contemporary Bowen Therapy circles. Like many other of the supposed truths, it is not necessarily correct. There are some who claim to have seen Bowen's work interpreted in the middle '70s. And we found a woman who would have been known to TB through the alternative health profession, who claims to have spent lengthy periods observing him work and established a course to teach her interpretation of what she saw. And there is another man in particular who has raised

eyebrows and not a few hackles with his claim of observing TB. When we must, these people we call the Bowenwatchers.

It's from these people that ideas and interpretations of what we now know as Bowen Therapy have derived, developed and been hatched, all because TB didn't really 'teach' any of them. At different times he allowed a small number of people to watch him do the work he'd developed based on what he was shown, without fanfare or explanation. He answered the odd question and discussed a few things from time to time, but his actual anatomical understanding didn't match his extraordinary tactile abilities. He let his hands do the talking and those who watched, mostly, had to figure it out. Some have done it with better understanding than others. That is the way of things.

It has been said that requests to observe were made every other day. Given his reputation this would appear not to be too outrageous. Well, maybe a little. It's also been suggested that the majority of those actually allowed in the door as observers to enhance their professional careers were eventually asked to leave, sometimes after just one session. That's how the story has gone, but nobody has been able to support this with first-hand knowledge. It's another one of those image-building things. It seems very possible that not everyone would have taken to TB or him to them but that does not make the broad statement a fact. It's merely an assumption and serves to add to the legend that is Tom Bowen.

It's also been said that some people were puzzled by Bowen's fickleness and his apparent lack of sensitivity to their aspirations when asking to observe. To quote Natural Therapist/Osteopath, Kevin Ryan, "...he believed that practitioners either had the gift to understand and learn his unique approach to muscular skeletal dysfunction through observation, or they did not." This quote, which comes up again for analysis later, is interesting in that it suggests that there was a standard by which TB judged potential observers. He may have had an informal standard such as, no bad breath, no swearing, a nice demeanor. But considering the fact that he issued broad invitations for people to observe him, the quote's based, I reckon, more on Kevin's admiration for TB than anything else; on how he would have wanted TB to be. It also serves to develop the image of those who observed TB as being special.

Kevin started observing just prior to TB having his first leg removed but was mainly there in the last year or two of Bowen's life – some eight or so years after the first of the acknowledged Bowenwatchers. I reckon Kevin's understanding of what TB was doing, as we'll point out later, is influenced by the logistical changes TB had to make after having had a leg removed.

Quotes like that above were not uncommon in the search for Tom Bowen. They're not necessarily based on reality but more on Bowen's mystique that has grown over the years, spurred on by the flurry of interest in the last decade or so. Flights of fantasy have taken wing with some people claiming extraordinary things, mostly based on how things may have been in the normal course of events. Many of the accepted 'facts' have been developed like this. There have been, also, extraordinary and puzzling claims that have Pinocchioed their way along over the years in the brief history of Bowen Therapy. There's lots of colourful stuff in the TB/BT story. It's a bodywork soap opera.

Tom might have answered a lot more questions from his observers had he not been hard of hearing, an issue which kept him from serving in WW2, despite being enrolled for a while. We scoured the National Archives to get his very interesting service record and the army history unit deciphered it for me. I'm not sure it doesn't ask more questions than it answers. It contained a hand written letter from TB.

Tom was from a family with involvement in the Salvation Army and this, in part, may help explain his wonderful generosity, such is the reputation of the Salvos. Among many other fine deeds, he often refused payment from those less able to pay. And his admiration for sports people often saw him providing free treatments. He was like that. His work was his passion. It brought him fame, it brought him pleasure, it brought him nowhere near as much money as it might have, and, to relay an oft stated line, it brought many people better health, often when other health carers had given up on them. Many of us who use manual techniques often come across people denied, ignored or given the bum's rush by medical people and, by thoughtful work, have been able to provide relief. So, while I would not suggest to compare to Tom, that statement is not totally indigenous to him. But it adds to the image creation that many of us have generated.

It's been suggested that TB dedicated his work with disabled children in his regular clinic to his granddaughter who passed on at age five due to complications from cerebral palsy. Establishing the clinic and treating carers too for free shows his extraordinary level of compassion.

All the while, his own health wasn't so great. Prior to starting out in bodywork full time, TB had a major health set-back. In (I believe) 1959 he suffered a collapse, generally referred at the time as a nervous breakdown, and was admitted to a mental health hospital. The reasons for the collapse and its consequences were many and varied. That he rose above this set-back to become such an important person in the lives of so many people is legendary. It's a great come-back story but not the only traumatic one he faced. This collapse was a pivotal time in

his personal life which may have led him to seek comfort with alcohol. He enjoyed, as several people told me, a whisky or two. This, according to anyone who had contact with him, affected no-one but himself. He still functioned well.

More major health problems were later in store for him. Unfortunately the Geelong hospital records that would explain the reasons for the removal of first one leg, then some time later, the other, have been destroyed. 'Lack of circulation' was the reason the family was given. Some have suggested diabetes as a cause but this is conjecture. He kept working after he'd had one leg removed then after having the second leg removed, while in hospital, he contracted an infection that he could not overcome. On 27 October, 1982 he succumbed to the infection. Chiropractor Kevin Neave summed it up: "*Absolutely sinful that a man of such merit died the way he did. Just sinful. Absolute bedlam.*"

A few years after his death one of his observers, Oswald Rentsch, put together a format of moves he claimed he saw Bowen do, then set about teaching it to anyone and everyone, eventually calling his work Bowtech (combining Bowen and Technique) and his school, The Bowen Therapy Academy of Australia. With wife Elaine, Ossie, as he's known, is responsible for many of us even hearing about Tom Bowen. That he inspired a new direction for so many of us is a fact that we will always acknowledge and be grateful. But he wasn't, by far, the first to formulate Bowen's work into a 'teachable' system. There were several workbooks, or at least worksheets, around and had been so for some time by the time Rentsch put his initial workbook together. Had he seen them? He's not saying but he at least knew others had been teaching. And well before he decided to do so. When Rentsch started teaching he was building on the (only limited) interest that had been slowly meandering around the back alleys of a couple of training institutions in Australia, particularly New South Wales, since the late '70s to early '80s. It had also made its (limited) way to New Zealand, I'm told.

To fulfil what he claims was a promise to TB to make his name known world-wide Ossie and Elaine took their course out of Australia, assisted in one instance by people who had trained in Australia and returned to their home country, and, in another, by family friends. With this support and very active, creative minds, the Rentschs initiated extensive interest in BT.

It would be fair to say that Ossie's Bowen-Watching peers are very happy with his promotion of TB's name but less than happy about his approach and his creative marketing claims. Bowen's children,

to be frank, have been most unhappy with them. There have been claims that the Rentschs initiated much misinformation about Tom Bowen and their role with him. Later we have interesting quotes on this subject. And a plethora of confusing information generated by them. Unfortunately the Rentschs have not made themselves available to clarify the confusion or refute claims made against them, if, in fact, that is what they would wish to do. There's a great deal of controversy in this tale which is just as well as it makes a more interesting story.

These days there are many schools throughout the world teaching interpretations of Bowen Therapy and thousands of practitioners using the work, either solely, or as an adjunct to other techniques, or using other techniques as an adjunct to BT. It has become an important modality, often making inroads in areas where other manual techniques have failed to impact. But it still has a long way to go and the interaction between the Bowen world and orthodox medicine will need to be carefully and sensibly handled.

Not unusually, the ever-growing number of Bowen Therapists has, in Australia and England in particular, spawned the establishment of associations. In Australia the Bowen Therapists Federation of Australia (BTFA) is the national therapist-led, independent organisation and the Bowen Therapist European Register (BTER) in the UK, having started life as one school's club, has mostly evolved to be a similar organisation. The Rentschs started their own club, the Bowen Association of Australia (BAA), which appears to be fighting for a little independence these days, having been firmly under the Rentschs yoke for many years. Its sister organisation in the UK doesn't appear to see the need for independence.

There are many interesting and dedicated people doing very special work using BT. Cancer, neurological problems and disabilities are conditions in which certain people have specialised interest. Their stories add to the tapestry of issues in which BT is now involved.

Internet creativeness about TB and BT is difficult to ignore. So I haven't. A chapter on internet silliness gives some interesting examples. One site stood out as the most outrageous creative drivel. It's a good story though. And the author does spell Tom Bowen's name correctly.

As I have delved further into the life of Tom Bowen I have found I've had to deal with vastly contrasting emotions, one I had not expected being deep sadness as I found a man trying to live up to expectations of others then facing aspects of his life that I am certain he would rather have not faced but could not deny on both moral and emotional grounds. The disappointments in his life were many, not only the premature death of a grandchild and the inability to impress the

enquirers who might have afforded appropriate recognition, but also, before that, not being able to live up to his father's expectations, unreal as they were. Then there was his failing health. The nervous breakdown would have shaken him up and it must have been an emotional roller coaster ride when first he had a leg removed. This aspect of the story ends with huge joy when he was finally able to resume his role as healer, this clearly shown in the relaxed satisfaction that shows in his face in the photo of him working on the neck of a very young disabled girl. How must he have felt being able to help so many such children, especially at a time when there was little recognition that any help whatever could be afforded these (at the time) often discarded little souls? Contrasting with the sadness was the joy of the man's abilities and the obvious deep satisfaction he felt by being able to be of such marvellous service to so many people.

This form of bodywork we call Bowen Therapy is unlike most anything else around the place. It's useful for anything that any other form of bodywork claims it is useful for. And some.

There are many unique features of BT; the use of site specific single moves, particular move sets designated as nerve blockers or stoppers (more on that later), minimal work to achieve maximum effect. It's a very strange but, as a doctor friend told me, "*very clever*" system. Single moves, often with an emphasis on the origin, insertion and/or belly of a muscle, in designated points to suit the ailment presented, are often (but not always) performed in sets before the applicator usually allows the body to rest a little and respond to the work thus far. An experienced, well trained therapist will recognise when and for how long they should wait, if at all, responding to identified changes. There are also more rapid moves, sometimes flicks, over tendons and ligaments, also single moves as part of a set. There are, in fact, variations on these move descriptions usually depending on what is required for the receiver at a given time and the skill and understanding of the applicator. It's very strange stuff.

The single move is a little 'under the skin' one-way rub. The belief in Bowen circles, and I have no hesitation in agreeing, is that by instantly repeating the move at the same place, the effectiveness is often diluted. The single move is an uncluttered, unequivocal message to the brain. It often has a huge impact way above its level of input. Little input; big reaction.

Why does it work? There are some extremely interesting theories, ranging through a variety of space-cadet inspired explanations to very practical physiological impacts such as with the connective tissue membrane, the fascia, which is all-enveloping in our bodies. Despite the

minimal input system, BT impacts in a way that inspires structural, and often, visceral, imbalance correction. On viewing the technique for the first time, many therapists simply believe that any impact could only ever be superficial. It is, in fact, much more than that, often creating massive structural correction. It's a technique that seems to be fighting above its weight very successfully, often achieving corrections in the body that challenge belief. Research into the role of fascia appears to be explaining this phenomenon.

Some Bowen Therapists work gently with feeling and understanding, others work hard and fast, quite unnecessarily I believe. And again, there are a few variations in between. Good Bowen Therapists, who understand what they're doing and especially those with the ability to adequately assess a patient's problem and target those issues, then understand what has been achieved, will get excellent results. But I've seen some shockers who still claim to get results.

The understanding of the applicator usually depends on who taught them, though some people do develop different understandings, sometimes by misunderstanding and sometimes by understanding really well. It's a really, really interesting form of bodywork and it often plays a big part in resolving some very strange issues. It really deserves to have a lot of attention paid to it by orthodox medicine. Mainly because 'they' are missing out on a really good way to help more people than their restricted outlook allows them.

Like many people who use a technique which we believe is based on the work of Tom Bowen, I grew into the work on the back of colourful tales of ability, achievements and potential with nary a grey cloud to darken the horizon. Here was the healing technique to end all of man's pains. Here was a therapeutic tool that would change the course of world medical history. If you didn't get the desired result, it was your fault, your inability to do the work correctly. Many of us believed this fairy tale. At first. Despite clear evidence, some still do, but the reason for that is another story.

From the start, our initiation into the world of Tom Bowen was an eye-popping, jaw-dropping experience. Our story-teller was impressive. He told the stories from first-hand experience. He'd actually observed Bowen work and therefore knew all. Between Irish jokes and bright ties he acted out his part in his awe-inspiring play presented as part of a course of instruction in Tom Bowen's true and defensible technique. This was the way Tom did it and it could be no other way. There was no other way! "*Keep it pure, or heaven forbid, it will be lost to the world.*" And if you asked why you did certain things certain ways, you were told '*because that's what Mr Bowen did.*'

It didn't take too long for thinking therapists to realise that there was a whole lot more to this game than our tutor was letting on or able to let on.

Then a revelation. There was more than one person who observed Bowen work for a lengthy period. We discovered that we had not been told anywhere near the full story in the first place. This was puzzling. The facts were always there to be discovered. Why ignore them? Did the facts dent the validity of our initial tutor's story? They need not have.

Eventually it was 'discovered' that there were actually five other men, four of whom are still living, who had been part of the story. This then became the new truth and they, along with our original storyteller, were anointed as 'Tom's boys.' That was it. At that stage. At least we became aware that there were other stories to be told by other people about Tom Bowen, people who could legitimately lay a claim to having first-hand knowledge of the man and his work.

In the context of the planned research into Bowen and the therapy, discovering the 'truth' of the time that there were only six men worthy of classifying as legitimate trainees of Bowen's made things quite clear. I thought the job would be easy – straight forward. Interview the family, interview 'The Boys' and tell the story. Unfortunately it wasn't that simple. Or, as I now view it, fortunately it wasn't that simple. It could have been really boring just writing a biog. Very early in the piece I discovered that there was going to be just a little more to it all than I had envisaged. Like, from the first interview with one of the anointed 'six.'

Some interviewees were, under questioning, prepared to say what we should have known from the outset; that TB could not help absolutely everyone. But all were prepared to say that he had more than a good measure of wonderful ability. All were prepared to say that he was an exceptional healer with outstanding diagnostic skills and generosity and a will to help whomever he could to the best of his ability. To a man, they adored him. They thought he was special.

Not until they were pushed did any say anything that might be construed as negative about TB. Not until the hard questions were asked did they admit to possible flaws in the man's character or ability. With the questions asked, the response from the interviewee inevitably was softened by their admiration for the man. Yes, there were flaws. No, it did not matter. Nobody, except maybe the man himself, was worse off for his personal flaws.

He was no saint. Yet all those who spent time with him in a working capacity can attest to seemingly saintly miracles. Youngsters consumed with spasticity being able to perform some functions bordering on

‘normal.’ Sports people distraught with the belief that their injury was the end of the aspirations for them and their team for the season, or even their own aspirations for the future, being able to recover with lightning speed. Chronically painful back injuries that had not responded to ‘the best treatments around’ suddenly responding despite minimal input by the practitioner. Severe asthmatic bouts relieved without drugs. Miracles? Not at all. It was all perfectly normal. For Tom Bowen.

But there were, of course, those he didn’t/couldn’t help. Miracles aren’t for everyone. There was one osteopath in Geelong who claimed Tom sent his difficult clients to him. I’m not sure I was convinced but that may have been based on my desire for TB to be The Greatest. When asked about his success rate, TB told a government inquiry, “*I would have to be quite modest about this. I would say my success rate would be 88 per cent.*” Arriving at such a figure without accurate record keeping might seem a little questionable. But I’m convinced it was not his nature to boast. In fact, quite the opposite.

There are claims of ownership of Tom Bowen’s work. The idea is silly really. It suggests that he used a set formula of treatments. Some disagreed on what they saw him do for particular problems at particular times. One said that some interesting aspects of the technique as deemed by others, was rubbish. Others said they saw him do things that, on the surface, were outrageous – using pennies to create electrical currents where no visible source of power was evident, to identify the part of the spine where the problem emanated with a disabled person. There are suggestions of hypnotism and claims of the power of suggestion, that his presence developed a placebo effect with some people, that they were ‘healed’ as soon as they walked into his clinic.

So many variations of ‘truth.’ Yet all are true – more or less.

When there are so many variations, where do you begin? A good place is at the start. Forget what’s gone before, start from scratch and question every accepted fact as it arises.

Tom Bowen’s bodywork career began in Victoria, Australia, and it’s here that the overall focus is directed. It’s always been assumed among many assumptions that his bodywork activities started in Geelong, near Melbourne. I don’t believe this was the case.

Previous attempts at addressing the history of Tom Bowen and the therapy he has inspired have always appeared in the form of starting with Tom Bowen, maybe with a mention of contact with a few of his peers, but invariably he was cited as the initiator, as if suddenly a marvelous gift was bestowed upon him to alleviate human suffering. To imagine that he suddenly had an epiphany that produced such a

radical approach to bodywork is too fanciful. He had no background whatever from which to draw the required knowledge.

We have some documentary evidence pre-WW2 where the influence began and this proves an important factor. But our main emphasis is with the forties and fifties. It was a time when an unassuming, compassionate young man explored his interest in healing. Initially it was a modest part-time beginning, but nonetheless a beginning. Had he known then that he was lighting a spark that now burns within thousands of therapists around the world, he might have balked at the concept.

I have endeavoured to present BT in the context of its place in the world. And, having the opportunity, I've also scouted around the edges to present a broader view of the world in which Bowen Therapists exist; their expectations and disappointments, their helping hands and hindrances. And often their unbridled enthusiasm for the work which sometimes allows their minds to run riot with expectation and, unfortunately, fantasy.

But first we need to build the field and look at the land of Oz.