

George Baden Powell Wilson 1900-78

* Joined 1936 & member for 42 years; president 1941-2, 67; director of tournaments 1940-47, 1949-65; NZCBA president 1944-5; Life Member 66; winner of 53 Club titles; NZ rep. 1968; International Master 1973; Club honorary solicitor



Richard George Wilson 1824-1887

Baden, the leading title winner in the Club's history, was the grandson of early settlers. His paternal grandparents, Richard Wilson & Agnes (nee Buttress) arrived in Otago in 1859 aboard the *Mariner* with their four little daughters from an English manorial estate, Lambourne Hall, north-east of London in Essex. Two older sons remained behind to complete their education at Kings School, Canterbury,



Agnes Wilson (nee Buttress) 1824-1893

before joining the family in 1862. Richard had sold his share in a printing & book binding business to his cousin and sought fresh opportunities and a better climate in New Zealand.



'Lambourne', the punga punga homestead on Wilson farmland, near Clydevale, Otago 1862-1874

They bought 1819 acres of land at 10s an acre in the Clydevale district between the 'V' junction of the Clutha & Pomahaka rivers and built a punga punga house there naming it *Lambourne* after their home in England. Today, Lambourne Road still runs along the west bank of the Clutha below



Baden's mother, **Erihapeti (Elizabeth) Potiki**, 1868-1937

Clydevale. However, in the late 1860s they moved to the coastal area of Willsher Bay just south of Kaka Point for health reasons & to be near the sea. Richard bought 500 acres and established his farm and home there. They brought up their nine children in a Christian environment with morning prayers and Sunday services and employed a governess. Richard & Agnes also did a lot to help the Maori community at the nearby settlement of Port Molyneux. (*Port Molyneux was a flourishing harbour port where the Clutha joined the sea behind a large sandbar but the 1878 flood swept away the sandbar and left the area a swamp*). The Wilson's governess later became the teacher at the Reomoana Maori School established at Paretai in 1881.

Baden's father, George, was the youngest of Richard & Agnes' nine children and was born at the Willsher Bay home, *Erlstoke*. In 1891 George and a brother, Richard, bought a property at Glenomaru, 10 kms north of Owaka in the Catlins district of S. Otago. In 1898 George married a woman of noble Maori descent, Erihapeti (Lizzie) Potiki, 1868-1937. Her grandfather Potiki was a signatory to the Deed of Sale of the Otago Block (signed at Otakou in 1844) and could trace his descent to the late 17thC / early 18thC Waimate warrior chief, Taoka. Baden's grandfather, Ihaia (Isiah) Potiki was described as a fine Maori. Baden, born in 1900, was the 2nd of eight children of this marriage.



Baden's birthplace - **Matuanui homestead**, Glenomaru, nr. Owaka, Catlins District, S.Otago, c. 1910

The graceful old homestead of Matuanui built in 1871 was a fine building with kauri floors, six fireplaces, stained glass lead lighting, a tennis court and beautiful gardens. The family also owned a crib at Pounaweia. Baden attended Glenomaru School (closed in 1940s) and entered Otago Boys High School as a boarder c.1913. He was a contemporary of the Fulton cousins, John & Jules, Ivan

Penrose and 'Kips' Campbell, son of Frank (Barney) Campbell, senior master and manager of the Rectory Boarding House for 26 years. When Baden left school he returned home until he was 22 working as the teamster at the farm, getting up at 5 a.m. to feed, harness and work the horses.



Baden as part of the
Otago University
Athletics team, c. 1925

He decided to go to University in 1922 to study Law. He was a talented sportsman and represented Otago University at rugby and athletics. He won a NZ Universities hammer throw competition in the annual athletics events. On one occasion playing tennis Baden was hit in the eye by a ball and lost a substantial amount of sight in that eye. He graduated in law in 1929 and joined the firm of Wilkinson, Rolfe and Wilson where he remained until his death in 1978. Baden married Doreen Kennedy and had one daughter, Lesley, who now lives in the Motueka district. His eyesight prevented him from enlisting during WW II and he served in the Home Guard. His life was tied up with his legal practice, the Otago Bridge Club and the Balmacewen Golf Club. He was president of the Golf Club c.1955 & had such influence that, in later years, competition times were worked around Baden's playing group, known as the *Tomtits* (Lindsay Brown, Ed McDonald, Algy Townsend, Reg Maskell). He also played the piano.



Baden Wilson after graduation
as a **lawyer** in 1929

When I came to write about Baden I realized how little I knew of his bridge genius, despite playing an annual game or two with him for seven years. He has been acknowledged as a great player by a number of writers and all those who played with him but few knew what made him tick. Stan Asher paid tribute to him in NZB (Dec 1978) shortly after his death, indicating that in his prime he knew no equals at the bridge table, as did John Wignall in his ODT column, describing him also as '*The First Gentleman of New Zealand bridge*'. His funeral in November, 1978 at Knox Church, conducted by the Very Rev Dr Jack Somerville, Master of Knox College, had all the dignity and praise accorded a great man with almost all of the Bridge Club present. The extraordinary deference to his bridge ability allied to an image of a man of high integrity and standing in the community left me wondering: 'Who was this man?'

His camaraderie at post-bridge social gatherings at the Club after a few whiskies was legendary and has been much characterized in the folklore of the Club. Also, he appears in all the minutes, all the records, in many of the anecdotes and is usually the final arbiter or decision-taker, yet there remains a mystery about the player and the man. I experienced but a brief acquaintance with the power of his presence at the table as he suffered a minor but significant stroke in the early 1970s. I did meet and play bridge against two of his brothers, Ted in Oamaru and Calder from Riverton but they gave few clues to the secret of Baden's bridge ability or power of thought.

Like many great players he had a talent at the card table, not memorable by any particular attribute but by expertise in all phases of the game. A measure of his ability can be gauged by the fact that he won the Services Bowl three times (1949, 1956 & 1960) despite being on a negative handicap most of the time. The Services Bowl, instituted in 1947, and possibly named to honour those who had returned from service during World War II, was awarded to an individual player who scored the best on handicap over a specific number of nights played in the Pairs, Teams, Ladder, 3-night and 1-night Howell competitions. The handicap was adjusted each week up or down if players were 1st or 2nd or bottom or 2nd bottom on scratch. In 1948 Baden finished the year on -1 & I estimate he would need to have averaged 61%+ throughout 1949 with his various partners to have won the Services Bowl that year. Some feat! The system is based around 60%=0 and handicaps could fall as low as -5. Anyone who has played under the handicap system will know that giving away up to 15% or more makes it very difficult to win over any one night and only a little easier over many nights.

As declarer, Baden read the opponents' cards well at the table giving himself every chance of making his contract. This hand from 1976, though the basic line of play is standard for most advanced players, shows Baden's subtle touch in action.

Dlr: S	♠ A63	S	W	N	E
Vul:EW	♥ KJ4	1♠	2♣	2♦	P
	♦ KJ854	3♦	P	4♠	All Pass
	♣ T8				
♠ J52		♠ Q8			
♥ 3		♥ QT98652			
♦ Q92		♦ 7			
♣ AQ8765		♣ K43			
♠ KT974					
♥ A7					
♦ AT63					
♣ J2					



Baden as he will be remembered
 ©Otago Daily Times, Allied Press Ltd.

Baden was South in 4♠. West led his singleton ♥ which Baden took in hand with his ♥ A. He drew two rounds of trumps and followed with a ♥ to dummy's ♥ K, noting when West showed out that East had started with at least nine cards in the majors. Many players would now play the 3rd ♥ discarding a ♣ from hand, hoping the opponents would show up the complete distribution of the hand or even open up the ♦ suit. But Baden could see the advantage of leading ♣s from dummy rather than from hand. *(After all he once established a trick for a side-suit Queen by leading twice from Qxx in dummy towards a singleton. This is similar to another improbable situation of establishing a side-suit seven as a trick with 7432 in hand opposite 98 in dummy by twice leading towards the seven. The K & A go up on your right dropping LHO's T & J, LHO's Q is then ruffed out & there you are, the seven is good!).* The subtle inference here is that West did not lead a high ♣ to 'have a look' so has probably not got AK♣ or even KQ♣ so Baden has a better chance that his LHO will win the first ♣ with the Q♣ and be end-played into showing up the full distribution, which is what

happened – West cashing ♠ J and playing A♣ and another ♣ giving declarer the full count on the ♦ distribution. Of course, a cunning defender would win the ♣ A, cash the J♠ and lead a ♣ hoping his partner held the ♣ K for him to play Q♥ & leave Baden equivocal about the ♦ distribution. But it is unlikely that Baden would have been fooled: East cannot have the ♣ KQ doubleton (or ♣ KQx for that matter) so West has deliberately taken the first ♣ with his Ace when he could have won it with the ♣ Q. Why? Baden would have seen through this ruse. Incidentally, East did well not to support ♣ s which would have made the ♦ distribution show-up – no point in supporting partner when you are going to be outbid. Such are the subtleties of thinking of the great player at the table.

Allied to this great technique was a 6' 5" (1.96m) stature, a green eye-shade and a countenance that quickly shifted from warm, cheery engagement to deep concentration and inscrutability once the cards were picked up. As has been mentioned, John Wignall characterized the image of Baden & Norman in a 1965 report, unfairly to my mind, as *'Ensconced behind much blatant propaganda, not to speak of green eye-shades and ferocious scowls'*. Certainly his aura was such that it was passed on as legend and retold as *'Beware the man at Table 1'* but *'ensconced'* Baden was not. He needed no protection and could do just as well without the aura – his demeanour was an integral part of the man, like Aslan, C.S. Lewis' lion, in all his majesty.

The impenetrable and unfathomable face of inscrutability is worth investigating further. Very few players in my experience can cultivate this most winning of countenances which conceals the true intent of the hunter or the dissembling gestures of the hunted. Body language, as it is called, is to be found in almost all competitors but, at the bridge table, it usually helps the opponents. Baden had long since realized this. Let us not forget he was also an excellent poker player. Part of the secret of inscrutability is to be found in forward thinking so that one's gestures do not correspond to the play to a particular trick. Some players put on opposite 'faces' to those they really feel, for instance when making a tricky lead, ducking a trick as though they had nothing to think about or playing tentatively towards the KQ on table when they hold the Ace so that defenders might misplace the high cards. But an expert like Baden took the process a stage further so that there was no emotion, no body language to relate to in any situation. To do so would have been anathema to his creed of integrity and professionalism.

Being part-Maori, tall, strong and intelligent he saw himself, I suspect, in the role of rangatira of his demesne, the Bridge Club. No stage could have been more fitting for the fulfilment of this role, both at the table and away from it. Away from the table his image has always been conveyed as a man in a pakeha world - lawyer, bridge expert, golf enthusiast with no obvious Maori associations. JM has little to say except that he was 'one of the oldest and best loved of the originals'. Stan Asher described him as 'a warm, generous and gentle man'. Yet there was a strong element of the paternal leader in the way he took over all aspects of the organization of the Club & in those late evening, post-play gatherings. His image of a man of great integrity and esteem fitted well that of a patriarch.



Baden Wilson in 1968: Life Master, Life Member, winner of 53 Club titles



Baden & Lindsay Brown (right) President, hold the **Baden Wilson Trophy** in 1976. The trophy recognizes Baden's services to the game both provincially and nationally & was presented to the NZCBA by the O/S Centre. It is awarded annually to the individual winner of the most masterpoints.

Enoka Macdonald (1987), whom I knew well from teaching days, was also part-Maori and of a similar personality. Like Baden, he loved the adrenalin-flow that competition brings, and thrived in a situation where he had an audience. Like Baden, Enoka had been a great sportsman in his youth, representing both NZ and UK at rugby league and in more recent times winning several gold medals in the Master Games. I well remember Enoka in action early in the morning on Otago Harbour, hailer at mouth 'broadcasting' instructions from a boat to his rowing eights and fours. Baden, I feel, struck a similar image.

Baden acted as master of ceremonies at the Bridge Club for many years, being Club Captain for 30 years, Tournament

Director, Scorer or 'Marker' and the final arbiter on suitability for membership. His astonishing

partnership with Dora Black in winning the Club Pairs for 21 years is never likely to be equalled. Dora died suddenly in 1963, but when tournaments got going in a big way from c.1964 Baden formed a partnership with Norman Allan which was to challenge the best in New Zealand. They won the Otago Provincial Pairs in 1965 & 1970 &, together with Bob Hudson & 'Algy' Townsend, the NZ Teams in 1966. Baden also represented New Zealand with Bob Hudson in the Australian Inter-State Championships in 1968 finishing a creditable 2nd to Victoria. Even in 1971 Baden & Norman were only narrowly beaten for a NZ Pairs title held in the High Street Rooms in Dunedin by John Wignall and Frank Lu. Baden will be best remembered today throughout New Zealand for the Baden Wilson Trophy, awarded to the player accumulating the most NZ master points in a year.



The five surviving children of George & Lizzie Wilson at a family reunion at Matuanui in 1977

Standing l to r: **Ted, John, Gladys Jackman, Calder**, and, seated, guarding the bottle of hard stuff, **Baden**

Source: Lesley Cranefield (Baden's daughter, Kaiteriteri, Nelson); Bruce Wilson (Baden's nephew, Matuanui, Glenomaru, Catlins District, S.Otago)