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Obituary

John Louis Dillon (1931–2001)



John L. Dillon, demonstrably a devout internationalist, was a true Australian in heart and soul. His Australian proclivities led him to activities that his many overseas friends (including now the present writer) may find strange, such as standing around, running around or sitting around sun-drenched cricket fields for literally days on end. Little did he know then that this would cost him at least a decade of life shortfall, as he succumbed on 5 June 2001 to the follow-on effects of melanoma, surely largely attributable to his time in the sun – farming, playing cricket and tennis or just watching some of his favourite sports.

Seldom in his career did John have the physical appearance of the quintessential scholar he surely was. He certainly stood out in the generally rather staid meetings of the CGIAR, whether it was the bright trouser suspenders or the jangling finger rings. Perhaps some of his lack of convention was linked in part to his time as a dairy sharefarmer in the Berrigan district, before joining the New South Wales Department of Agriculture as a Research Officer? For myself, I remember being rather surprised when I first met him in 1965, this being in the midst of his stark crew-cut phase. This person was to become my mentor? The prospects seemed bleak when, as I sat bedazzled by the crew-cut giant, the conversation opened with two questions: (i) Do you play cricket? He was keen to strengthen the Departmental team, but I had to clarify that this was a game in which I had absolutely no interest; (ii) Are you a Catholic? Which evinced a similar response. And then somehow he managed to get into our conversation that he disliked dogs (one of which we had as a child substitute). But he took a chance on me at any rate, for which I shall forever

be thankful. We became the best of friends, and managed to stay close even when separated by an ocean and more, especially when during the mid-1990s he at last put those giant fingers on a keyboard and abandoned his refusal ever to deal directly with a computer.

Towards the end of John's life, after having lost much of his left ear to skin cancer, he wore his hair quite long (although mostly under the inevitable bush hat), a phase that I identified to him as 'fearless, peerless and earless'. He was indeed peerless in so many ways on the academic, personal and professional fronts, the latter being recognised in many ways, such as in his several honorary doctorates, and the award of a Distinguished Life Membership (Anonymous 1995) by this Society (and also the International Association of Agricultural Economists). John served the Society in several important ways, including as Editor 1965–1967, and as President 1971–1972. John was a devoted, rapid and eclectic reader, much given to biography, especially of mathematicians and economists, *Quadrant*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and a dizzying array of economics journals, as visitors to his professorial office at University of New England (UNE) will vividly recall.

John was first led to his career in economics by Keith Campbell while completing (in 1952) his Bachelor of Science (Agriculture) at the University of Sydney. To read his own account (told in his and Alan Powell's 1998 Fred Gruen obituary), his intellectualism (my word, not his) traced back importantly to the inspirational professional environment he found himself in at the NSW Department of Agriculture in his first job as an agricultural economist, with a highly stimulating group of colleagues who would so influence his development, including such luminaries as Fred Gruen, Alan Lloyd and Ross Parish. After subsequently (with Fulbright assistance) triumphing through Iowa State University, with a highly successful association with his new mentor, Earl O. Heady, and the AAEA PhD thesis prize, he went on to a brief but influential stint at CSIRO (in Melbourne and Canberra), and then to a short but remarkably productive period at the University of Adelaide (with Frank Jarrett, Alan Powell, Harry Burley and others). At 33, he was appointed Foundation Professor of Farm Management at the UNE (an academic title that may not have been everyone's envy, but was staunchly defended and supported by John to the end), and he spent the remainder of his academic career based in Armidale, with periods of teaching in Chile, Brazil and India, and consulting in Hungary, Egypt and several other African countries, not to mention Rome and Washington, DC. John took his roles in institutional leadership seriously, serving at various times as Head of Department (several variants over the years), Faculty Dean, Chair of the Academic Board, and Pro Vice-Chancellor at UNE. He was renowned for his administrative skill and incisive approach to tough problems, combining a robust self-confidence with an essential humility, and an earthy honesty with an unwavering sense of

courtesy. His reputation for mischievous humour, especially when confronted with enlarged academic egos, was legendary, and will be long and nostalgically remembered in academic gossip circles.

Throughout his career, John produced path-breaking advances in agricultural economics and farm management, reaching out to cross-disciplinary approaches from production theory, decision analysis, econometrics, operations research, systems analysis and organisation theory. It is not easy to do justice to his 200-odd written works in a short space but, putting aside his half-dozen books that show up on Amazon.com (under John L. Dillon or Jock R. Anderson), something of his range is indicated by his informative and entertaining reviews of game theory (Dillon 1962), subjective expected utility theory (Dillon 1971a) and systems theory (Dillon 1976), his critical work on his chosen profession (e.g. Dillon and McFarlane 1967 and Dillon 1988), his many pieces on agricultural research and technology (e.g. Dillon 1987) and last, but not least, his enduring joint works commissioned through the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (such as Dillon and Hardaker 1993 and McConnell and Dillon 1997).

John was great to work with, especially on a writing project. He certainly pulled more than his (considerable) weight in joint work. One of our fun efforts was a book on *Agricultural Decision Analysis*, with Brian Hardaker in the mid-1970s. John lacked the enthusiasm for a second edition, so we came to an alternative solution, with a different sort of book (*Coping with Risk in Agriculture*) which in its second edition will indeed be dedicated to him.

John Dillon's span of interests regularly went well beyond his professional patch of agricultural economics. His willingness to stretch the borders of accepted wisdom was reflected, by way of one major example, in his efforts to secure accreditation and professional recognition for chiropractors. His association grew out of an encouraging encounter with this profession following an early back injury. He finished up serving as a foundation member of the Australasian Council on Chiropractic Education from 1976 to 1988.

In the area of international development, John was prominent on the national as well as the international scene. From 1985 until his retirement in 1994, he was a leading figure in the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research. He also performed significant leadership roles in an unprecedented number of international agricultural research centres. He was, for instance, Chair of the Board of Trustees of several centres, including ICRISAT, ISNAR and ICLARM (as well as 1985–1986 and 1992–1994 Chairperson of the Committee of Board Chairs of CGIAR Center Boards of Trustees), and through these and other Board duties and responsibilities fostered successfully a sharpening of the development focus and the bringing forward of an aggressive concern for attacking poverty. He did much to lift standards of governance of these boards, and was regularly brought in as a

problem solver. To the extent that these roles involved managerial review, he was always respected but probably also feared in some quarters, his reputation for blunt reporting having gone before him. Part of that reputation dates from his (1970 Minsk Conference of the IAAE, Opening Plenary Session) reverberating summation of the Soviet academician Romyantsev's major paper as being (Dillon 1971b) '...rather like an English sausage – it contains very little meat and a lot of filling.' Naturally, he went on to substantiate this probably excessively generous view. Notwithstanding his direct manner, he was the recipient of numerous awards, medals, fellowships and honorary doctorates. In 1997, he was invested as an Officer in the Order of Australia for services to agricultural economics and international development economics.

John is survived by his wife Rita, their nine children, one foster daughter and some 15 grandchildren. He leaves a large network of loyal ex-students, a legion of friends around the world, and a profession that will sorely miss one of its real characters.

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