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♦ OBITUARY ♦

Donald Birtall Williams

Don Williams, who died at 72 last September, was literally one of 'the founding fathers' of the agricultural economics profession in Australia.

At the Inaugural Meeting of the Australian Agricultural Economics Society in 1957, he seconded the motion to form the Society, and was elected Vice President with Keith Campbell as President and Fred Gruen as Teasurer.

Younger members of the AAES will know of Don only as the Herculean editor of three editions of *Agriculture in the Australian Economy* in 1967, 1983 and 1990, since he devoted his last two decades very largely to agricultural extension and agricultural education.

Following military service, Don completed an Agricultural Science degree at Sydney University and a Bachelor of Commerce at Melbourne University. He then spent two years as rural economist at Roseworthy Agricultural College.

His PhD dissertation at Illinois in 1951 was noteworthy in that it won the American Farm Economic Association prize for that year. It was a pioneering work in farm management economics, and provided much of the foundation for the 1957 book with H. C. M. Case on *Fifty Years of Farm Management*. From retirement in Ireland, Jack Lewis writes: 'I recall hearing it said at the Corvallis annual conference of the AAEA in 1953, that Don Williams had been a stimulating influence as a PhD student at Illinois and had done much to renew the vigour of the Department there. It was soon to be strengthened by the arrival of Harold Halcrow, Earl Swanson, George Judge, Chet Baker and others.'

From 1951 to 1957 Don worked in the Commonwealth Bureau of Agricultural Economics, where he became Assistant Director. In 1957 he made a career switch into agricultural extension, though he remained active in agricultural economics. He became O.I.C. of the Agricultural Research Liaison Section in CSIRO, where his duties included administrative responsibility and professional leadership in the interpretation and dissemination of CSIRO research results.

Don Williams was an innovator: he rocked boats and made waves, an activity which did not always please 'sound chaps' in the bureaucracy. In hindsight, the legacy of his innovations is impressive and others have reaped the benefits. As Officer-in-Charge of the CSIRO Agricultural Research Liaison Section, Don emphasised in the

late 1950s the importance of relevance in agricultural research in CSIRO, an emphasis which did not always sit well with the then prevailing ethos in CSIRO. That agricultural research resources needed to be managed was also manifest in the 1972 Weickhardt Committee Report on Wool Research in CSIRO for which Don was Secretary. It is somewhat ironic to note the changing attitudes towards agricultural research in CSIRO in the 1990s where management of research resources is very much to the fore and CSIRO is expected to derive a significant part of its research budget from private sources.

From 1964 to 1970 Don was Director of Agricultural Extension (and Visiting Professor) at the University of Melbourne, where his vigorous and imaginative leadership placed Australia's agricultural extension education and research on a firm foundation. Don's second book *Agricultural Extension* (Melbourne University Press, 1968) is testimony to that. He returned to the CSIRO from 1971 to 1974, where he was Secretary of the Wool Research Advisory Committee.

In 1974, he commenced his third phase: he became the first Director of Roseworthy Agricultural College after it was transformed from a somewhat sleepy sub-department of the South Australian Government into a fully-fledged CAE in the heady days of the Whitlam Government. The autonomy conferred by a separate Act of Parliament and funding from Canberra made transition problems for staff, students and the College Council. Don embarked on a series of developments aimed at expanding course offerings, increasing student numbers and raising the research status of Roseworthy. A course in Horse Husbandry, a degree in Natural Resources and the Environment, a Postgraduate Diploma in Arid Zone Agriculture and expansion of course in Oenology occurred in fairly rapid succession. An Agricultural Museum was begun and the student facilities — Roseworthy was still largely residential — improved with a new Student Union building and swimming pool.

In all this development resources were required. Don made successful forays into the CAE system — too successful for some — and entered into resource commitments in the form of staff to teach the new course offerings. In the normal course of events students would have been attracted and the necessary funding obtained. However, Budget constraints resulted in a Canberra-imposed cap on student numbers and on cash flow. The College Council in conjunction with the Director took a series of steps to reduce the cash outflows and increase cash inflows. In the latter context, the College Council arranged for an overdraft with one of the banks. As a sub-department of government, revenue shortfalls when they occurred were funded by Treasury so no private overdraft facility was necessary. The bank required a government guarantee and in attempting to obtain this a whole series of events — many of a doubtful nature — occurred. Only two of the College Council were re-appointed, and a S.A. Agriculture Department Officer was appointed to assist with 'managerial and

financial advice'. Mr T. Groom — currently the Minister for Primary Industry in South Australia and a then member of the College Council — was quoted: 'In correspondence, the Minister (for Education) had implied that if changes were not made to personnel at the college there would be no further funding for Roseworthy' (*News* April 21, 1980). The then Council stood firm but its composition changed. Subsequent moves involved libel action, litigation and an out-of-court settlement.

Don Williams retired as Director after having beaten off a number of attempts to 'merge' the College with larger institutions. However, the urge to merge fostered by Canberra, saw Roseworthy Agricultural College merge into the newly named Faculty of Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences of the University of Adelaide. The early work on Arid Zone Agriculture was brought to fruition when Roseworthy became a Key Centre for this work funded by the Australian Research Council. The Agricultural Museum now features in press releases on the changing technology of Australian farming.

Don Williams underwent heart surgery after his retirement in 1981, but continued to work as Editor of the highly successful *Agriculture in the Australian Economy* and on the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. His contributions — largely unsung, or even worse, misrepresented — to Australian agriculture were enormous. Despite the slings and arrows, and with the support of his wife Maureen and children, Don maintained a cheerful face. His passing has deprived the profession of one of it stalwarts and his friends are left to mourn.

Don had two happy marriages — with two daughters from his first marriage to Clare and two sons from his marriage to Maureen.

Frank Jarrett — *University of Adelaide*
Alan Lloyd — *University of Melbourne*