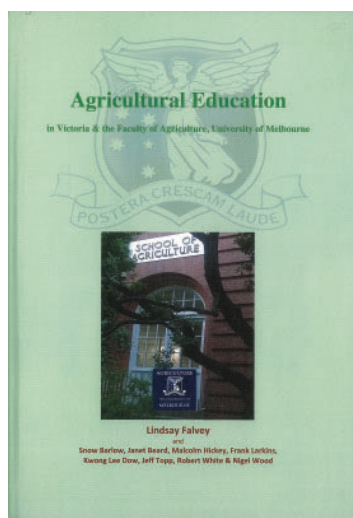


Lindsay Falvey, Robert White, Malcolm Hickey, Nigel Wood, Snow Barlow, Janet Beard, Frank Larkins, Kwong Lee Dow and Jeff Topp: *Agricultural Education in Victoria & the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Melbourne*. The Society of Old Agricultural Fellows: Melbourne, 2017. 220 p x pp, illus., ISBN: 9780975100059 (HB), free online at <https://oafslive.files.wordpress.com/2017/08/agricultural-education-r.pdf>.



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This book surveys agricultural education in Victoria from the 1860s until the University of Melbourne established the merged Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences in 2014. Its story centres on interactions between the Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Melbourne (the Faculty), founded in 1905, and the six Victorian Colleges of Agriculture and Horticulture, three of which were established before it. The narrative also includes the Faculty of Agriculture at La Trobe University, established 1968, plus Marcus Oldham Agricultural College, an independent provider created in the early 1960s. From that period onward, agricultural education became a highly competitive environment. Attempts to win a lucrative slice of the pie—and the hearts and minds of potential students—greatly influenced the ups and downs of the above teaching institutions.

The Faculty reached its high point over the period 1925–56, when Sir Samuel Wadham was dean. During this time it held total sway over academic agricultural science education in Victoria, as new disciplines were picked up and taught with vigour. Following Wadham's retirement, large gaps in the appointment of full-time deans left the Faculty short on strategic planning until the 1990s. As an example, there was ongoing argument as to the best timing and location for Melbourne University agricultural science students to undertake their year of practical instruction. Choices varied between years 1, 2 or 4, while the shifting sites included Dookie Agricultural College, the State Research Farm at Werribee, or the Faculty's Mt Derrimut campus. Finally, it was concluded that time away from the main university was simply unproductive.

From the 1960s, Marcus Oldham College, near Geelong, and La Trobe's Faculty of Agriculture provided alternative perspectives on agricultural education. Furthermore, with long-term appointed deans, they lured away potential students from the Melbourne faculty. With financial restrictions constraining government budgets from the late 1970s, the agricultural colleges were cast adrift from the Department of Agriculture in the 1980s. Predictably, the contest for resources, prestige and a place in agricultural academe intensified. All lost out in the battle, each attracting lower student numbers overall. The authors remark that: 'The Faculty, over this period was myopically preoccupied with its comfortable position, largely unbothered by the University administration so overlooking La Trobe's more popular course'.

One major planning deficiency across the sector was a lack of coordination between the Faculty and the Board of Agricultural Education, and the Department of Agriculture. This disconnect between education providers and the largest employer of their graduates came to beleaguer the agricultural education sector when the colleges were forced to merge after the Dawkins reforms of the late 1980s.

In a Prefatory Note, the authors state that this account 'relies on the views of informed participants raised in the integrated field of agricultural science, and who by nature and training attempt to reduce personal bias and to place their observations into a living context'. There are no citations from the minutes of the Faculty of Agriculture, nor

from the many reports and inquiries into agricultural education and practice that were conducted from the late nineteenth century onwards. Such research might have provided an alternative perspective to the memories and personal notes of surviving participants. The result is that it is difficult to determine who were the true antagonists hindering strategic planning for

integrated and coordinated agricultural education in Victoria, other than in remembered generalities such as politicking, internecine disputes, regional and local interests, and poor due diligence.

Anyone connected to agricultural education, or who worked in the public agricultural and veterinary fields over 1950 to 2014, will find this book an intriguing read. It is truly surprising to learn how long it took before decisive action brought about reform in the agricultural sector. Only time will tell whether century-old issues have been laid fully to rest. Perhaps universities are the source of good intrigues. There were certainly machinations aplenty in the closure of teaching at the Melbourne Veterinary School in 1927— but that is the subject for another history.

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