

Obituary

David John Connor 1938 – 2026



The Society of Old Agriculture Fellows (OAFS) of the University of Melbourne acknowledges with sadness the passing of its Fellow, David Connor. An academic of the old school, David was fastidious in his approach to science and to integrity in university administration, a characteristic evident to the last in his preparation of a concise review of his professional life in his final days.

Born in England, his family migrated to Melbourne in 1952. Awarded a Government Scholarship in 1956, he studied Agricultural Science at The University of Melbourne and upon graduation joined the Soil Conservation Authority of Victoria before returning to The University on a scholarship from the Wheat Research Committee of Victoria. His weed ecology research in wheat crops in the Wimmera earned his doctorate in 1964. In 1965, with his wife Katharine Wade and children Helen and Matthew, he accepted a Lectureship in Botany at the University of Queensland. After Jane was born, the family moved in 1971 to Melbourne where David was appointed Senior Lecturer in Agriculture at LaTrobe University by Foundation Professor Robert (Bob) Reid.

The Agricultural Science course at LaTrobe University had begun in 1968, the second year of the university's existence, as its theoretical and applied science flagship. Several of the students of that first intake recalled David's contribution to the integrated curriculum of the School of Agriculture, including Marg Bright, Jim Shovelton, Neville Oddie and Lindsay Falvey. David assimilated gradually into that happy School and quickly gained a reputation as a stickler for precision in crop physiology and agronomy assignments. During his tenure at LaTrobe he began his major contributions to graduate research, supervising five of the first six PhD candidates at LaTrobe. Through these 12 years he also initiated his international activities, first in 1971 as a Fulbright Scholar and then in 1979 as a visiting scientist to Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical where he honed his fluency in Spanish. Through these connections, he developed his expertise in crop modelling and drought response.

In 1983 David was appointed to the Chair of Agronomy in the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry at The University of Melbourne where he remained until 2002. He expanded his research and supervision across fields of crop physiology in wheat, rice and sunflower while also serving as Deputy Dean and Chairman of the PhD and the Computer Users Committees of the university. His 1992 book, '*Crop Ecology*', with Bob Loomis from the University of California and in the 2011 second edition with Ken Cassman of the University of Nebraska, was translated into Japanese, Spanish and Chinese. While at Melbourne, he widened his international experience through periods at UC Davis, University of Cordoba, University of Buenos Aires, and FAO Rome, while also leading the ACIAR Bangladesh Rice-Wheat Research project and a separate crop modelling exchange with The Agricultural University of Hebei, China.

Midway through his time at the University of Melbourne, the Faculty underwent major expansion to absorb the six colleges of the Victorian Colleges of Agriculture and Horticulture (and Food Science). This introduced major challenges and opportunities, both of which stimulated David's commitment to enhancing research in the cropping zones of southeastern Australia. He served the Faculty in various capacities, including; Associate Dean, Curriculum Revision Committee and various ad hoc groups that supported integration and upgrading of key personnel from the Colleges. His tenure at Melbourne was highly productive, as observed by various colleagues from the OAFS:

- Adrian Egan recalls of his fellow OAF that, "one way or the other, as Heads of Sections/Departments in the years from 1983 to 1990, we practiced a valuable competitiveness and charged at a lot of windmills. We also shared happy social lives in those early years. Our years together soldiering on from 1990, when I became Dean and he was scheduled as Deputy Dean, were very disruptive. David and I tag-teamed to frustrate some of [the university's] manipulative moves that would have destroyed the Faculty." The outcome of these battles was the expansion of the Faculty and appointment of an executive Dean to revamp agricultural science education, a reorientation in which David's knowledge and contacts were invaluable.
- Brian Leury writes of his fellow OAF, "I was very saddened to hear of David's passing. I have many good memories of him. When I first joined the University of Melbourne, he was a familiar and welcoming person to talk with. I had known him earlier during his time at La Trobe University, when I was an undergraduate and later a postgraduate student." David's experience with both of the State's major providers of agricultural science university education brought an integrated vision for the agronomic research and education that enhanced Victoria's continued status as Australia's major agricultural production hub.
- Paul Taylor remembers his fellow OAF as "a significant figure in my early years in the Faculty in the mid 1990s especially with his support and involvement in the Joint Centre for Crop Improvement. On leaving the Faculty, David gave me his academic gown, which had seen many a graduation and other activities, which I wore to last December's Faculty graduation. Rest in peace, memories will live on." The Joint Centre for Crop Improvement was a highly successful initiative to integrate the university's research and graduate education with that of the State Government, Longerenong Agricultural College and LaTrobe University. David was its key scientific driving force throughout its productive existence.
- Lindsay Falvey commented on his fellow OAF that "David was well entrenched when I joined the Faculty as Dean in the mid 1990s. Having once lectured me and assessed my undergraduate research project at LaTrobe University, he initially seemed

inclined to continue his role as critic. We soon evolved a productive relationship based on his rigour and logic in honing our academic arguments within a renewed vision for the expanded Melbourne Faculty. We last met in late 2024 over coffee near his St Kilda Rd apartment on one of his visits from Madrid. His last email in November 2005 advised that his leukaemia had not responded to treatment and that his 'foreseeable future is not very bright, a controlled fall ... keep smiling'."

In the expanded Faculty of the late 1990s, David's tenacity was an essential force in the creation of Australia's largest and most diverse grouping of agricultural science research and education. He further advanced agronomic research with the Victorian Government across the Wimmera and beyond, which he coordinated with the Faculty's rising energy in the animal and soil sciences while integrating agricultural economics and other social components into his advanced crop modelling. Through these years, David's significant contributions to agricultural science were lauded by his peers through his election to Fellowship of the Australian Institute of Agricultural Science in 1988, the award of a Higher Doctorate by the University of Melbourne in 1991, appointment as Professor Emeritus of the University of Melbourne in 2002, and as the recipient of the C.M. Donald Medal of the Australian Institute of Agricultural Science in 2003. Among his many professional inputs, he was Editor-in-Chief of Field Crops Research journal for seven years from 1994.

After 2002, David assumed the post of Visiting Scholar at the Instituto de Agricultura Sostenible in Córdoba working on olive hedgerows, and served on a Spanish Government Agricultural Development project in Mauritania. In 2004 he re-married agronomist Maria Inés Mínguez Tuleda, accompanying her to a secondment to the European Commission. Thereafter he was engaged in International Agricultural Development and with the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid.

Having written definitive papers related to crop agronomy, including a learned repost to uninformed policies to restrict the application of nitrogen and other fertilizers and unrealistic expectations to feed the world from organic farming, his final written words were of thanks to his close family, especially his wife Inés for support during his illness ... and also to "many colleagues in universities and research institutions worldwide for guidance and friendship during an interesting and academically productive life". His final words to his professional colleagues were to "wish all a final collective thank you and best wishes for their futures".

David's fellow Fellows of the Society of Old Agricultural Fellows remember him as a major force in the continuing vocation to maintain the integrity of strategic and applied agricultural science so as to deliver sustainable and productive science-based food systems for the world.

Prof Emer Falvey
On behalf of OAFS