



Professor Emeritus Robert Edwin White (1937-)

Robert (Bob to many of his colleagues) White is a leading international soil scientist and academic who has consistently applied his science and art to a range of practical outcomes in agriculture over a career of six decades. This Tribute by the Society of Old Agriculture Fellows of the University of Melbourne presents a summary of the many achievements of Professor Emeritus Robert White.

Born in Brisbane in 1937 he moved with family to Maryborough (QLD) when he was nine. He completed his agricultural science degree at the University of Queensland and was awarded the William Woolcock prize in chemistry. In the same year he was elected to the Rhodes Scholarship for Queensland to enter the University of Oxford with St Edmund Hall as his college, from where he completed his DPhil in soil science. Returning to Australia, he joined the CSIRO Division of Tropical Pastures as a Research Officer on the nutrition of tropical legumes. His next move was to the Department of Botany at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa before becoming a lecturer in soil science at the University of Oxford with a fellowship at St Cross College. Oxford provided Bob with challenges and experience in college fundraising, and as Junior Proctor, in the byzantine operations of a major university. During his time at Oxford, Bob wrote his first major book, a textbook entitled 'Introduction to the Principles and Practice of Soil Science.' Published by Blackwell Scientific, it was republished in three more editions, the final one being in 2005.

From Oxford, Bob moved back to the southern hemisphere accepting the role of Head of Soil Science at Massey University (New Zealand) concurrently with the Directorship of the Fertilizer and Lime Research Centre. There he remained for six years until he accepted a professorial fellowship at the University of Melbourne in the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry. In this role, Bob was to be introduced to the discussions between the University and the Victorian College of Agriculture and Horticulture, which in turn led to him accepting the Chair of Soil Science and becoming Acting Dean and Head of the Department of Agriculture and Resource Management.

Bob's major research undertakings at the University of Melbourne included leadership of the Temperate Pastures Sustainability program and the national Sustainable Grazing Systems program under Meat and Livestock Australia funding, and leadership of an Australian Centre for Agricultural Research program in China that modeled

nitrogen dynamics of crops grown under irrigation on the North China Plain. From 1996, he became interested in the role of vineyard soils, pursuing a scientific basis for the elusive element of 'terroir' in wine. This new focus took him to the University of California Berkeley and led to his book, 'Soils for Fine Wines', published by Oxford University Press. This was followed by a shorter version called 'Understanding Vineyard Soils', which went into a second edition while he was continuing to provide advice as a consultant to the wine industry in Australia and abroad. He distilled his knowledge into a co-authored book with Dr Mark Krstic of the Australian Wine Research Institute. 'Healthy Soils for Healthy Vines' was awarded the prize of the International Organization of Viticulture for Sustainable Viticulture and Viniculture for 2020.

Among his many honours are Honorary Membership of the International Union of Soil Sciences, the J. K. Taylor Gold Medal for scholarly soil science publications, Honorary Life Member of the Australian Society of Soil Science Inc., and the J. A. Prescott Medal of Soil Science for outstanding contributions to soil science. Having been sole author of more than half of his 17 books, he has also contributed 11 book chapters and published more than 250 scientific and conference papers.

In addition to the above appointments, Bob has spent time at the Universities of Stellenbosch and California, at Rothamsted Experimental Station and with the Chinese Academy of Science. Importantly to this organisation, he was the first Honorary Secretary of the Society of Old Agriculture Fellows, the OAFS.