

**PROFILE: - OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY OF
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Vale

GERARD (DICK) BLACKBURN 1918 – 1999

Dick Blackburn, who was a Life Member of the S. A. Branch of this Society, died in Adelaide on 6 August, 1999, aged 81, after a long battle with leukaemia. He was well known as a pedologist and contributed much to knowledge of southern Australian soils and landscapes. Dick graduated from the University of Melbourne with a B. Agr. Sci. degree and began his career as a pedologist at CSIRO Division of Soils in Adelaide in 1946. He was based in the Division's Adelaide laboratories for 37 years, until his retirement in 1983.

Here he became a member of a group of pedologists, recruited by J.A. Prescott and J.K. Taylor, and at that time led by C.G. Stephens, who had established soil survey as a basic tool for the assessment of land capability, especially in relation to irrigation. This group, together with pedologists in the other regional laboratories of the Division were major contributors during the period (1945-1955) recognised by J.K. Taylor as the peak of activity in soil surveys in Australia.

Dick was a leading member of that generation, who achieved national and international acclaim for the quality of their contributions to practical and theoretical aspects of soil science. One of Dick's earliest field studies, starting in 1948, was carried out with Bob Baker of the S.A. Dept of Agriculture. Their aim was to relate erosion in the north of South Australia to soil factors. Soon afterwards, he began his long association with work on the soils of western Victoria and the south-east of South Australia, when he worked with Ian Leslie in the Coleraine area. Many other surveys in that region followed, and among those he worked with were Wally Litchfield, Ted Jackson and John Loveday.

His name is notably associated with the surveys of the Ninety Mile Desert region and its development for agriculture. He was a gifted teacher and contributed much to the practical training of young pedologists, as well as introducing chemists, physicists and others to soils in the field. He contributed also to the planning and selection of sites for field studies by other soil scientists – for example, he determined the best location in the south-east of SA for the Soils Division's classic experiment on the contribution of ground water to water use by vegetation.

His work in the south-east region culminated in the identification and meticulous mapping of extensive stranded beach ridges originally proposed by the geologist Reg Sprigg. In 1956, Dick collaborated again with Bob Baker on the international stage when they carried out an arduous and foot-slogging survey of the soils of the State of Brunei, North-West Borneo.

Dick was always more interested in the practical use of soils and how this was influenced by their origin, rather than in their formal classification. His interest in wind borne dust (parna) and its associated salts was probably triggered by his work with John Hutton and Bob Clarke on the volcanic ash content of soils around Mt Gambier. Later he showed the importance of salt in soil dust contributing to salinity in the River Murray Basin.

Dick had a unique interest in the history of soil investigations in Australia. He kept meticulous records of his own work, from which he could provide accurate information on all the field work he did during his career, and he collected a great library of material relevant to Australian soils and agriculture. Dick gave a very well documented collection of slides to CSIRO, which is housed in the CSIRO Land & Water library in Adelaide.

After his retirement in 1983, he began to gather information for a history of the development of irrigation from early settlement to 1920. The manuscript of this book was completed shortly before his death and we look forward to seeing it in print. During his retirement he also meticulously edited hundreds of profile descriptions for the CSIRO archival soils database.

His scientific work over the years represents a major contribution to Australian soil science and agriculture, but perhaps more than for anything else, Dick will be remembered as a quietly spoken, kindly man, a good husband to his wife Jean and and father to his three children, and as a man of high principles, who was an ardent supporter of social justice.

Ken Lee, Bill Emerson, Rob Fitzpatrick and Malcolm Wright