

IN MEMORIAM

TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR HUGH BRYAN SPENCER WOMERSLEY (19 November 1922–16 January 2011)



With the death of Bryan Womersley in January of this year, not only has Australia lost its phycological leading light, but the world at large marks the passing of surely the finest macroalgal regional monographer of the 20th century. In the over 60 years of his active research, he and his students have elevated the broad coastal expanse of southern Australia from a virtual *terra incognita* of enormous algal biodiversity to the status of being among the best taxonomically understood stretches of richly endowed coastline in the world.

Bryan's story and achievements have been chronicled in a 75th birthday tribute by Woelkerling & Borowitzka (1998) and a recent update by Wynne (2009), and although the highlights of his long and productive life will again be canvassed briefly below, the focus of my efforts will be to talk of his life from the standpoint of one of his students who for several years experienced him daily. Although Bryan could be unstinting of his time and capable of warmth, he could also be a formidable figure that people might have wished to know better in other circumstances than those that they found themselves in.

In 1970 my late first wife and I picked up Bill Woelkerling at the Honolulu airport and hosted him for a day before he proceeded on to the mainland United States and a postdoctoral position after completing his PhD on acrochaetoid algae under Bryan. Since we were about to embark for Adelaide to start the same degree process, our natural question to Bill was 'What's he like?' 'Well', said Bill, 'he really has but two non-family preoccupations, the first and foremost being the marine-algal studies for which he and his students are noted, the second – albeit minor – being local politics. As a supervisor he'll show a keen

interest in what you have found. He will not, however, devote a lot of time to hearing excuses when you haven't found anything'. That proved pretty accurate. On hitting town we were kindly boarded by Bryan and wife Alleyne for a week as they helped us find a flat, then we were immediately whisked off on one of his regular excursions to the beach. Driving with Bryan was a unique experience. Despite his 48 years of life he remained unfailingly shocked and appalled by the habits of other drivers and kept up a running commentary on their incompetencies. If the highway patrol had just been doing its job properly all these miscreants would have been hauled off the road, and we'd have had clear sailing all the way to Robe.

On that first excursion too we came to know what Bill Woelkerling remarked on in his eulogy to Bryan, namely his 'wry' sense of humour. This most frequently involved latching on to some feature of one's background or culture in order to submit it to a critical analysis. One quickly learned that the best response to this was to agree with him. Thus he once said to me 'Why do the people of your country refer to their national pastime as "football" when it's patently obvious that feet almost never come in contact with that object?' The reply was swift: 'You're absolutely right, we ought to call it "throwball" ["handball" was a name already usurped]. In fact I was once benched in a grammar school match for kicking the ball well before that was the only last-ditch option.' There were some compensations, however, in the fact that my previous education clearly lacked the attainments of good British or Australian standards. Whenever I fouled up, which was frequently, we could both agree that the fault surely lay not with genetically determined character flaws but in my errant liberal-arts background. Such repartee could be loads of fun, although it was also probably true that when it came to saucy jesting he dished it out better than he tended to receive it. There was one person, however, from whom he took constant ribbing with grace and good humour, and that was my former supervisor in Hawaii, Max Doty. Max told me that whenever he would come south to visit he always brought Wom a loaf of Love's Bread, a totally bleached-out bakery product of the Star Market in Honolulu from which any ingredient of possible nutritional value whatsoever had been thoroughly expunged. Max claimed that you couldn't get decent bread in Adelaide and so he was doing Wom a favour. We were all sitting on the beach once at Nora Creina and Max said to me 'Gerry, go pick up that piece of drift floating over there; I'll need it for my monograph of the seaweeds of South Australia'. Bryan was not as amused as he might have been, both because he couldn't be absolutely sure Max wasn't serious and

primarily because Max had made a grave semantic error. As Bill also pointed out in his eulogy, Bryan despised the word 'seaweed' and corrected its every utterance made in presence. These beautiful objects, he held, are not in any sense 'weeds': they are the splendid exemplars of 'marine macro-algae'.

Well, almost always he corrected the use of 'seaweed' but one time he didn't was one of my lasting memories of Wom. We're all sitting in a pub in the Victorian town of Portland: Bryan, several of us students, a bunch of visiting firemen including Max Doty, Shirley Sparling, James Marsh, Jan Watson and Tony Larkum, and along with us several abalone fishermen who were going to boat our divers out to an offshore pinnacle the next day to collect. Now abalone divers make scads of money but they earn it by spending long hours in freezing water flirting with the bends and knowing that the white pointer that finally gets you is the white pointer you never see. At one point one of the abalone divers turned to Wom and pointedly asked 'What sort of a [real?] man is it who spends his working life looking at seaweed?' Wom not only let the 'seaweed' go by, he replied immediately, patiently and with panache: 'Well', he said, 'although I wasn't born in Australia, I've lived almost all my life in Adelaide. I went to high school and university there and have worked professionally ever since at that same university. That may be what a lot of people over there have done – at least also working all their lives in the same town – but I have traveled to every continent bar Antarctica. In every place where people also study plants of the sea I have acquaintances who know well who I am, what I do, and who offer me hospitality. When I visit the library of any big university in the world I can go to the shelves and take down publications that have my name on them, and those articles are about things that I have discovered and named myself. I have a lovely wife, two wonderful sons and a house with a tennis court in Netherby. And I owe it all to seaweed'. The guy looked thoughtfully at him for a second, then replied 'You've answered me well.' Have I embellished Wom's eloquence over the years since 1971? Probably, but the gist is right and I've never forgotten his inspired riposte.

I was fortunate to be a student during the 'golden age' of Bryan's postgraduates, those whose theses, on publication, became instant classics of alpha-taxonomic work. Starting with Elise Wollaston and followed by Bob Baldock, Elizabeth Gordon(-Mills), Bill Woelkerling, the recently late and much missed Murray Parsons, U Min-Thein and Steve Skinner, Bryan's students were legacies, contemporaries and successors that made Bryan's lab a cynosure of active, creative, stimulating and lasting work. It makes one proud to have been part of that heritage. The intensity of Bryan's demands was regularly lightened by the hospitality that he and Alleyne extended to not only his own but the department's postgraduate students generally, and although (as Bill Woelkerling pointed out) it was wise to make sure your doubles tennis team always lost to Bryan's, that was very easily accomplished because he was so much better at the game than we were. And when the work was done, approved, submitted and passed, Bryan was unfailingly generous in having his successful students publish solo in recognition of their efforts. That generosity, as well as an amazing capacity to organize, allocate time and produce results, is the legacy that all of his students have taken from

their association with Bryan, although clearly none of us has come close to matching his achievements.

What follows will be a summary of his career highlights and awards, as well as an updated bibliography from the 1998 paper by Woelkerling & Borowitzka. But I will add just one final set of reflections on Bryan's career. In my own research and teaching time I have known many keen students who have gone on to do great things but I haven't met a single one who wasn't a convert to marine-algal taxonomy from something else, usually zoology but actually from many foreign fields. No one I know ever graduated from high school dreaming of becoming a seaweed specialist (wait, I think I misspeak myself because I believe that Professor Max Hommersand is one exception to the rule). But Wom's route to taxonomy is in line with the usual story. His early research interests were very much in marine ecology, and in pursuit of that he undertook a PhD project on the descriptive study of a pristine intertidal reef platform on the south coast of Kangaroo Island. This is not the sort of ecology that people would do much of today, since it involved qualitative assessments of species diversity and distributions through space and time that at best may yield correlations but that don't address in any precise and statistically rigorous way the causes. Still, in 1972, some 25 years after the work was done, I revisited his study area armed with his maps and found things virtually exactly as he had described them, so accurate was the documentation and so unchanged the habitat. But Bryan had no one to coach him in how to put correct names on all the myriad of entities he was finding and mapping. So, as he long afterwards told me, he determined to take just one year off from the ecological studies that were his true love to do a bit of basic taxonomy and work out the names that he should be applying. Sixty years later he confessed that although he gave it his best shot, that 'one-year's' work was still ongoing and nowhere near finished. That may be true, and the growing body of molecular data confirms that it is so, but his life's accomplishments that are encapsulated in the six volumes, 2781 pages, 36 colour plates and 1059 black-and-white photograph and drawing plates of his encyclopaedic *Marine Flora of Southern Australia* series will probably relegate most of whatever comes next to appendices and footnotes to his monumental work.

One day in 2008 I said with mock seriousness to the 86-year-old Bryan 'When are you getting started on the seventh volume, the one devoted to marine cyanobacteria?' Bryan showed that he'd lost none of his ability to fix the asker of a stupid question in his patented wryly exasperated stare.

Bryan is survived by his wife Alleyne, sons Robert and Peter and grandchildren David, Rebecca, Melanie and Grant.

LIFE CHRONICLE OF B. WOMERSLEY

- 1922. Birth in Bristol, England.
- 1930. Movement with family to Perth, Western Australia.
- 1933. Movement with family to Adelaide; attended Unley and Adelaide High Schools.
- 1943. Awarded BSc, University of Adelaide.

1944. Awarded BSc (Honours), University of Adelaide.
 1947. Awarded MSc, University of Adelaide.
 1952. Awarded PhD, University of Adelaide.
 1960. Awarded DSc, University of Adelaide.
 1946–1949. Lecturer, University of Adelaide.
 1950–1960. Senior Lecturer, University of Adelaide.
 1961–1973. Reader, University of Adelaide.
 1974–1987. Professor (Personal Chair), University of Adelaide.
 1987–2011. Emeritus Professor, University of Adelaide and Honorary Associate and Curator of Algae at the State Herbarium, Adelaide.

AWARDS AND HONOURS OF B. WOMERSLEY

1955. Edgeworth David Medal, Royal Society of New South Wales.
 1969. Verco Medal, Royal Society of South Australia.
 1977. Elected Fellow, Australian Academy of Sciences.
 1985. Clarke Medal, Royal Society of New South Wales.
 1985. Prescott Award, Phycological Society of America.
 1986. Mueller Medal, Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science.
 1999. Prescott Award, Phycological Society of America.
 2003. Centenary Medal.
 2004. SA Great Award for Environmental Science.

TAXA NAMED AFTER B. WOMERSLEY

Bryan authored over 320 genera and species in his career and has had the following genera and species named in his honour:

- Womersleya* Papenfuss.
Womersleyella Hollenberg.
Champia womersleyi A.J.K. Millar.
Ceramium womersleyi R.E. Norris & I. A. Abbott.
Gayliella womersleyi T.O. Cho, Maggs & L.J. McIvor.
Gelidiella womersleyana G. Kraft & I.A. Abbott (= *Parviphycus womersleyanus* (G. Kraft & I. A. Abbott) B. Santelices.
Gibsmithia womersleyi G. Kraft & R. Ricker *ex* Kraft.
Trithamnion eubryanii Athanasiadis.

POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AND TOPICS OF THEIR MONOGRAPHS OF SOUTHERN AUSTRALIAN REPRESENTATIVES

1960. Mohammed Nizamuddin (PhD) – genera of the Fucales.
 1966. Elise M. Wollaston (PhD) – tribes of the Ceramiaceae.
 1968. Alan Bailey (PhD) – the family Chordariaceae.
 1969. Elizabeth M. Gordon(-Mills) (PhD) – tribes of the Ceramiaceae.
 1970. Robert N. Baldock (MSc) – the tribe Griffithsiaeae of the Ceramiaceae.
 1970. William J. Woelkerling (PhD) – audouinelloid (acrochaetioid) algae.
 1972. Murray J. Parsons (PhD) – the tribe Lophothalieleae (Rhodomelaceae) and family Dasyaceae.

1973. U Min-Thein (PhD) – families of the Gigartinales.
 1974. Gerald T. Kraft (PhD) – families of the Gigartinales.
 1978. David P. Thomas (PhD) – epiphytic estuarine diatoms.
 1980. Stephen Skinner (PhD) – myrionematoid algae.
 1989. Karen S. Edyvane (PhD) – the family Gigartiaceae.

PUBLICATIONS OF H.B.S. WOMERSLEY, 1998–2010

1998. *The Marine Benthic Flora of Southern Australia. Rhodophyta – Part IIIC, Ceramiales – Ceramiaceae, Dasyaceae* (Department for Environment, Heritage and Aboriginal Affairs, Government of South Australia), 535 pp, figs 1–235, colour plates 1–2.
 2003. *The Marine Benthic Flora of Southern Australia. Rhodophyta – Part IIID, Ceramiales – Delesseriaceae, Sarcomeniaceae, Rhodomelaceae* (Australian Biological Resources Study, Canberra), 533 pp, figs 1–226, colour plates 1–2.
 2003. The Encounter 2002 Expedition to the Isles of St Francis, South Australia: marine benthic algae. *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia* 127: 141–151 (with R.N. Baldock).
 2004. Additions to the marine algal flora of southern Australia. *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia* 128: 205–212.
 2006. Letter to the editor. *Phycologia* 45: 604.
 2009. Long-term changes in macroalgal assemblages after increased sedimentation and turbidity in Western Port, Victoria, Australia. *Botanica Marina* 52: 195–206 (with S.A. Shepherd, J.E. Watson & J.M. Carey).
 2010. Harvey's Australian Travelling Sets of Algae in the Herbarium of Trinity College Dublin and the National Herbarium of Victoria, Australia. *Biological and Environmental: Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 110B: 119–161 (with J.A.N. Parnell, D. Sinkora, A. Vaughan & J.M. Huisman).

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REFERENCES

- WOELKERLING W.J. & BOROWITZKA M.A. 1998. A 75th birthday tribute to H.B.S. Womersley. *Botanica Marina* 41: 1–5.
 WYNNE M.J. 2009. To Professor H.B.S. Womersley in honour of his continued contributions to phycology. *Botanica Marina* 52: 193–194.