

Quantitative rigour and passion for forestry

Alistair Graham Duncan Whyte 1939 - 2005

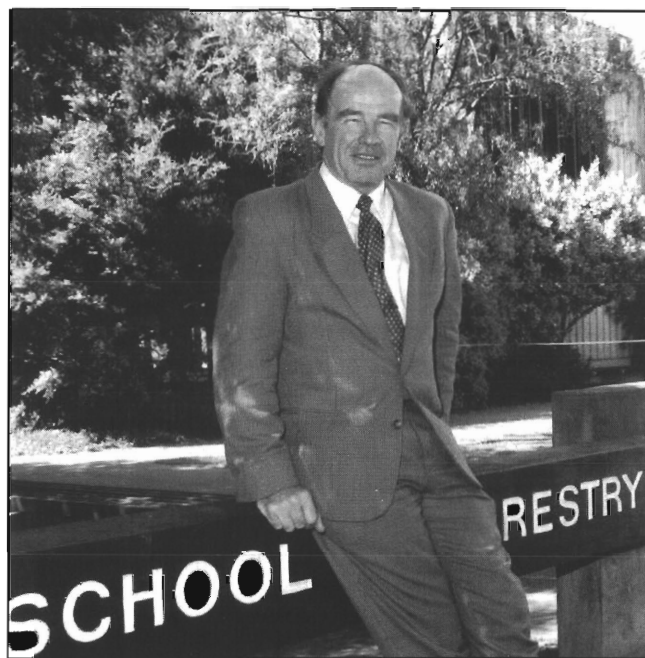
Graham – he was always called Graham – died in Christchurch on 29 June, 2005. He was born in Peterhead on the east coast of Scotland in 1939. His Scottishness was one of his strongest traits. That explains his accent, his reverence for learning and his conservatism, using that word in its best positive sense. He was a piper and much in demand on Burns nights.

Graham enrolled in forestry at Aberdeen University where he did very well, passing at the bachelor level in 1960 with honours and obtaining a PhD degree in 1963, with a thesis on the growth of timber on the Culbin Sands. He finished off his professional training with a diploma qualification in forestry at Oxford. It was a good and comprehensive educational foundation. Doubtless its breadth was one of the reasons for the tolerant and liberal attitude that Graham always displayed; he had a great ability to understand the other person's values and point of view. He was on the staff of FRI from 1964 to 1969. He joined this Institute in 1965 and was made a Fellow in 1988. He gained the Thomas Kirk Award in 2000.

In 1969 we were looking for teaching staff for the new School of Forestry at Canterbury and Graham with his intense interest in mensuration plus expertise with computers was clearly in our sights. Luckily for us Graham had grown impatient waiting for a computer to turn up at FRI. And so in November 1969 Graham and Rosemary arrived in Christchurch to join us, Graham as one of the foundation staff. Recruiting Graham to Canterbury was one of the best things I did for the School.

Graham had a great influence on his students. His quantitative rigour and his scholarship rubbed off on many. His interests broadened with time, from a narrow focus on measuring forests to managing them and he taught and wrote about this at length. And wider yet still, to an interest in managing the forestry sector at the national level. He communicated steadfastly about this, in his quiet courteous way, with politicians and the media when he thought they had it wrong. Forestry was his passion and he expressed his views about it fearlessly.

His broadening continued in the University. He became local president for the Association of University Teachers and so one of the best known people on the campus. He became Head of the School of Forestry in 1992 – 1994 and was also Dean for a specified period. In both roles he showed the necessary tact and flexibility. He also showed strength. Graham was a strong person administratively and academically. He broadened professionally too, travelling to forestry venues to give papers or advice to places like Japan, Scandinavia, Brazil, Sarawak and east Africa. Also he and his students provided immense hands-on assistance for a number of years to a government afforestation project in Fiji.



Graham was one of the hardest-working and most productive people I have known. But despite his many accomplishments there was about him a refreshing and appealing humility. He exemplified well Eisenhower's dictum, "always take your job seriously, never yourself."

After 25 years at the School he retired early, seeking a change of scene and also a change of activity. He wanted to get more into consulting work overseas. With his experience and expertise and his contacts all over the world it would have been a great success but it was not to be. Robbie Burn's "untimely frost nipt sae early" and he lost to leukaemia after a ten year battle.

Graham was a notable sportsman. In his younger days he played rugby for Scotland and Oxford University. When he arrived in New Zealand he played for the crack Bay of Plenty team of the 1960s. He even hooked for forestry student teams when they played local teams away on practical courses. And he refereed senior rugby in Christchurch. He was University squash champion. In later life he enthused over golf.

We shall remember, with respect and affection, a quiet, modest, strong and gallant Scottish gentleman who in his time played a major role in New Zealand forestry, and who faced up to long illness with great courage.

Our sympathy goes to Rosemary, sons Duncan, Cameron, Fraser and grandson Devon.

Peter McKelvey