

Geoffrey Bruton Sweet

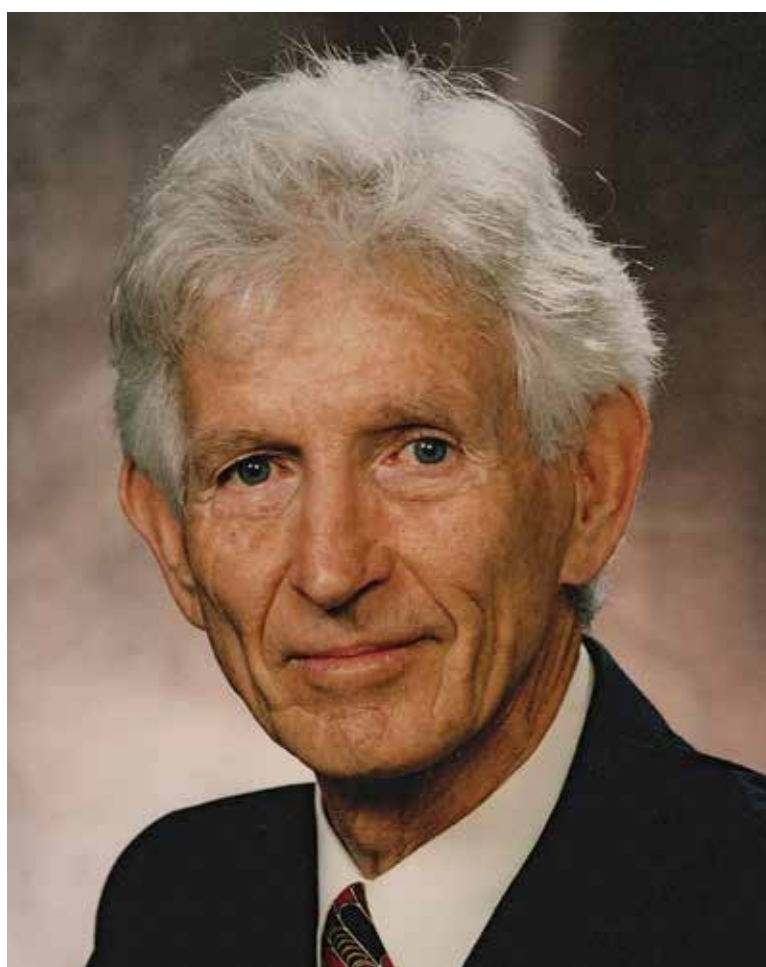
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Prepared by Ross Dickson

Professor Geoffrey Sweet was a leading figure in New Zealand forestry, actively advancing research, mentoring students from all over the world, and fostering a culture of collaboration and future thinking.

After graduating from King's College he attended Auckland University where he graduated with a B.Sc. majoring in Botany and Zoology; he was Senior Scholar in Zoology. Once employed at the New Zealand Forest Research Institute (FRI), Geoff was sent to Canberra to study for a Bachelor of Forestry degree at the Australian National University. The two years spent there not only allowed him to enjoy the Australian student life, but also travel widely and learn about the Australian forest environment. Geoff was a very successful student and graduated in 1958 as best all-round student from the course, earning the Schlich Medal.

Geoff was appointed to a role in the Forest Tree Genetics section at the FRI through the New Zealand Forest Service. The FRI encouraged him to seek research qualifications from a world-leading institution, and in 1963 he travelled to the UK to undertake his PhD



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studies at University College of Wales, Aberystwyth under Professor P.F. Wareing, a leading Plant Physiologist of his time. Geoff worked on the physiology of growth rate in radiata pine and other conifer species, working long hours on his thesis amongst all the duties of bringing up a young family.

Returning to the FRI in Rotorua, Geoff's brief was to deliver the physiological research necessary to underpin the radiata pine breeding programme. His main research contribution at the FRI was in the area focused on the physiology of radiata pine pollination, and his detailed research proved crucial to the development of control pollinated seed orchards. He and

his graduate students continued this research when he moved to the School of Forestry, with much of that work then being undertaken at the Amberley seed orchard. From 1978, he managed the FRI forest health programme, covering pathology and entomology, as well as tree breeding. Later this was expanded to include other areas of production forestry.

Geoff was also given special responsibility for computing services across the Forest Service. In his various management roles at the FRI he developed a

reputation for being a sympathetic leader who would listen to the concerns of staff, and take the advice of staff who had expert technical knowledge in areas beyond his own. It was in this spirit that he led the Institute and the Service into the adoption of computerised research systems in the early 1980s.

In 1979, he applied for and was awarded a D.Sc. from the University of Canterbury, a doctorate based on the quality of one's research output, in Geoff's case his research on the physiology related to radiata pine tree breeding. During his research life he published more than 80 papers and chapters of books, a number of them in partnership with overseas scientific researchers.

In 1985, Geoff and Margaret moved to Christchurch for him to take up the position of Professor of Forestry at the University of Canterbury. Here Geoff, known to his students as Prof, soon settled into the academic life of the university and enjoyed the stimulation that it provided. He continued and strengthened connections with the forest industry, the FRI other research institutes. Early in his tenure he oversaw the first major expansion of the building, expanding the size of the lecture rooms at the School and enhancing the administrative block. He proved to be an excellent leader for the School and will be remembered for his easy, outgoing personality.

At the School of Forestry, Prof and some of his graduate students undertook basic physiological studies of important native trees, including podocarps and beeches. An interesting conclusion by Prof and several of his postgraduate students from temperature growth studies was that our native trees have higher optimal temperatures than many temperate species, and this was presumably a hangover from the more sub-tropical conditions in the Miocene. Their findings seem to explain our lower timberlines and perhaps bode well for the adaptation of some of our major indigenous species to climate change.

Prof was a researcher and academic with the ability to bring science and commerce together, and to look at real life challenges through both a scientific and commercial lens. A rare skill in a research scientist. As an example, through his university role Prof forged a working relationship with Proseed NZ Ltd, a small government-owned company producing genetically improved radiata pine seed for the industry at a seed orchard at Amberley, North Canterbury. This relationship led to the establishment of an industry consortium known as the NZ Seed Orchard Research

Group comprising New Zealand forestry corporates at that time. Prof had achieved a long sought-after collaboration for the industry, and before long he had four postgraduates working on radiata pine seed production. It was through this work, in part, that the industry was able to effectively set up large-scale industrial seed orchards across New Zealand to produce genetically improved seed for future plantation establishment, the benefits of which we are still seeing today.

Both Prof and Margaret took a genuine interest in each of us as postgraduates. We were always welcomed into their family home for celebrations and social catch-ups. Every year, they maintained an Easter tradition for the Forestry School's overseas students, organising an annual visit to the West Coast forests based at the School's Field Station at HariHari. As mentioned, Prof had significant diversity within his postgraduate team, studying a whole range of forestry-related topics from social forestry right through to plant physiology. It was through the fostering of the postgraduates and their achievements that both Prof and Margaret made tremendous contributions to all parts of the world, and particularly developing countries where the graduates would develop new skills and knowledge at the School and take them back to their home countries.

Geoff was a very progressive force within the New Zealand forest industry and was also Editor of the *New Zealand Journal of Forestry* for five years. He shared a lifetime's passion for the outdoors and led his family and friends on many tramping routes through the mountain country of both the North and South Islands. He was a natural and everyone who tramped with him had great confidence in his calm good judgement – he was trusted.

After retirement, in Christchurch, Geoff and Margaret established a new outdoor tradition for 10 days each January, booking accommodation in one of the many mountain lodges along the backbone of the South Island high country to explore a local river valley with a group of friends.

Geoff died on 26 December 2020. At his funeral there were many tributes for Prof from former students at the University of Canterbury. Without exception, the students he supervised for their postgraduate work described him as kind and patient and a man who influenced so many lives professionally and personally to the point that the Prof became our friend.