



Members in Profile

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Bob Solomon



I enjoyed geography at school. As we moved around NSW with my school teacher father, a variety of economies and landscapes was experienced. Secondary school topics such as soil conservation in Australia, the cotton and wool industries of Lancashire and Yorkshire, the iron and steel industry of the USA extended the range of geographical interest. In 1954, my First Class Honours in geography at Sydney University, my athletics and my community activities won me a 1955 Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford. I believe I was the second geographer to be a Rhodes Scholar, after Chauncy Harris of Chicago (Utah 1934).

Before setting sail I joined the Council of the Geographical Society, lectured it on Broken Hill in February 1955, and taught geography for six months at Sutherland Intermediate High School (six classes, average complement 45). I added considerably to my geographical knowledge at Oxford, not least from extensive travel in the British Isles and Europe. After ten exams in six days in the summer of 1957, I made my first visit to North America, to run against Harvard and Yale.

I passed up the opportunity to work with Professor Gutkind at the University of Pennsylvania on his International History of City Development, got married and took up a lectureship at the University of Tasmania in the small but able department headed by Peter Scott, who later became President of the International Geographical Union. My lecturing responsibilities were extremely wide, even for those less specialised times. They included regional courses on both Southeast Asia and Western Europe, as well as systematic courses such as population and settlement, economic geography for commerce students, and practical subjects like map projections.

I was elected sub-professorial representative on the University Council in 1962 and in 1963 was awarded a Commonwealth Grant by the Carnegie Corporation of New York to visit 20 North American universities, which began my year's study leave. In the course of driving 12,000 miles in three months I gave a few lectures, met many leading American geographers and was taken on great urban inspections by people like Tom McKnight at UCLA, Harold Mayer in Chicago and Doug Eyres at North Carolina. I have recently been retracing those tyre marks for autobiographical purposes, and turned my photographic record into a talk for the Travellers Club in March 2014.

The first eight months of 1964 were spent in London, based at University College, for work on the historical geography of Hobart, and concluded with the IGU Congress in Britain, before returning to Tasmania. I was Secretary of Section P of ANZAAS for its very successful 1965 conference in Hobart and in 1966 was elected Hon Sec of the Institute of Australian Geographers. I became involved in political organisation and, having recently completed several years of doctoral research, was elected to the House of Representatives as the Member for Denison. As the most academically qualified member of the Parliament and the only one with any professional geographical knowledge, I persuaded Prime Minister Gorton, the party room, and next PM, William (Billy) McMahon, that the Commonwealth should be involved in urban affairs. This resulted in the establishment in 1972 of the National Urban and Regional Development Authority (NURDA), which was renamed the Cities Commission by the incoming Whitlam Government, and considerably extended by establishing the Department of Urban and Regional Development (DURD). With some irony, having lost my seat and returned to Sydney, I worked on several projects for those bodies in my capacity as director of an urban research firm.

My research on Hobart was published in full in 1972 as *Urbanisation: the Evolution of an Australian Capital*, and in 1988 I drew on my Honours field work of 1953 when commissioned by the Broken Hill City Council to write the city's centenary history. *The Richest Lode. Broken Hill 1883-1988* is a big book with 600 illustrations, which was very well reviewed (by peers and others!) and bought.

The Australian Institute of Urban Studies (AIUS) was founded by the Social Science Research Council and the Australian Planning Institute in 1967. I became NSW Chairman of AIUS in 1978, national Chairman twice in the 1980s, and was made an Honorary Fellow in 1986. The national secretariat closed about that time, but some States, including NSW, continue to promote urban affairs through public discussion and research. I have been Chairman again since 2002 and, mainly for that work, was awarded an AM in 2010. This was the same year I was elected again to the Geographical Society Council, for which I am now Convenor of the Travellers Club.