



Geographical Society of New South Wales Life Membership

1st December 2014

**Donald Sidney Biddle, AM
BA, MEd, PhD, FRGS,
FACE**



This speech was given by Dr Stephen Codrington honouring the award of the Society's Life Membership to Dr Don Biddle at the annual Awards Night on 1st December 2014

It is a rare and humbling privilege to have been asked this evening to speak about one of the true 'greats' of Australian geography and geographical education, Don Biddle. This occasion is a significant one, as the Geographical Society of New South Wales seeks to honour Don Biddle and acknowledge his contributions with the award of life membership of the Society.

Don's service to geography has extended over a longer period of time than I have been alive, and I'm far from being the youngest person in this room this evening! Don first trained as a primary school teacher at Sydney Teachers College from 1940 to 1941 (yes, that is 74 years ago). He taught for two years in small schools before serving for a couple of years with the RAAF in the South-West Pacific. He resumed his academic studies in Geography at the University of Sydney, graduating with first class honours in 1950. Following his graduation, he taught in high schools for seven years, first as a classroom teacher and then as Head of Department, at Griffith High School, North Sydney Boys High School and Glen Innes High School.

In 1958, Don was appointed as lecturer in Geography at Sydney Teachers College. He was quickly promoted to senior lecturer in 1963, and then appointed as Head of Department in 1966. From 1969 until his promotion to Vice-Principal of Sydney Teachers College in 1976, Don was Assistant Principal, Deputy Principal, and in 1975 and 1976, Head of the Division of Post-Graduate Diplomas and Degrees.

He took study leave from 1972 to 1974 to undertake his Ph.D. studies at the University of London Institute of Education. He was clearly recognized as being a highly talented rising star, having been awarded first the Thomas and Ethel Mary Ewing Scholarship, and then in his second year, an Australian Imperial Relations Trust Fellowship. He was awarded his Ph.D. in 1974 for a ground-breaking thesis entitled *The Use Of Curriculum Theory in the Formulation of a Systems Model for Constructing and Evaluating Secondary School Geography Curricula in England and Wales*.

Don's contributions to geography, and his involvement with geographical education, are so prolific that to list all of them would make this a very long evening. For decades he was an active member of several education boards and committees, and during the period from 1958 to the early 1980s, this included the Geography Syllabus Committee of the Board of Secondary School Studies (including serving as Chief Examiner in Geography for both the Leaving Certificate and Intermediate Certificate Examinations), the Geography Syllabus Committee of the Secondary Schools Board, he served as Chairman of Examiners for the School Certificate Examination in Geography, as Curriculum Consultant to the Joint Committee of Social Studies Subjects, and he was a member of the Secondary Schools Board, including service on the Executive Committee of the Board. He was also a member of the Geography Syllabus Committee on the Board of Senior School Studies between 1965 and 1972.

Other committees where Don gave service include the UNESCO Social Science Committee, the Advisory Committee on Geography Films of the Commonwealth Film Unit, and the Director-General of Education's Advisory Committee in Curriculum Development in New South Wales. At the same time that all this was happening, Don made valuable contributions to several professional organisations, including of course the Geographical Society of New South Wales. Don was first nominated as a member of the Geographical Society's council just over 60 years ago in 1954, and between 1955 and 1959 he was Honorary Secretary. From 1959 to 1964 he was a Vice President, again becoming Vice-President from 1969 to 1970 before serving as our President from 1970 to 1972. This contribution was immediately followed by a term as President of The Australian Geography Teachers Association – a national peak organisation that Don played a significant role in helping to establish. He served again as our Vice-President from 1975 to 1977, councilor from 1977 to 1978, Vice-President in 1978 and 1979, and then President again from 1979 to 1983, then Vice-President from 1983 to 1991, councillor in 1991 and 1992, Vice-President in 1992, councilor from 1992 to 1999, and then as a co-opted councilor for almost a decade. Furthermore, Don edited the Society's Newsletter for many years (off and on between at least 1963 and 1993, and possibly longer), setting a very high standard of editorial quality while maintaining a strong sense of community among the Society's members. Just to be clear, the list I have just glossed over outlining Don's service to the Geographical Society represents well over half a century of distinguished, humble, supportive executive service to the Geographical Society and its members.

And if this were not enough, Don has made a huge contribution to geographical education through his own published works in geography and geographical education. With well over 50 publications, Don has had a significant impact on the teaching of geography and the formation of young geographers, especially in secondary schools, both in Australia and overseas.

Together with Trevor Langford-Smith, Don volunteered his time to assist in the delivery of the International Geographical Union (IGU) Congress in Sydney in 1988. This was a major conference in Australia's bicentennial year, held in conjunction with the International Cartographic Association, which involved almost 2000 delegates at the University of Sydney. Don provided invaluable behind-the-scenes support that was solid, consistent and helpful for the conference organisers, support that truly enhanced the conference experience for delegates. It was just another example of Don's helpful support of others and his tireless willingness to help and serve others.

I first met Don Biddle about 35 years ago when I joined the Council of the Geography Teachers Association in 1979, by which time Don was getting close to retirement. I knew Don's name as the author of several significant geography books and as a senior figure involved with

examinations and syllabus development. Don was, for me as a young teacher, a 'legend' – one of those lofty names that seem to have been there forever, a pillar of the discipline. I was therefore completely taken aback when I met him by his humility, his approachability, his gentle humanity, his generosity of spirit, and his tireless willingness to help and support others – including me, a young teacher. To those of us who were involved in geography and geographical education at the time, we could not have had a better exemplar or role model than Don Biddle – an inspirational educator, a humane and compassionate examiner, an energetic and inspired researcher, a prolific writer and speaker, a thoroughly authentic geographer and equally importantly, a man who epitomized the truly supportive colleague and friend to so many of us.

Don's distinguished contributions to geography, to geographical education, and to the Geographical Society of New South Wales, are – in the considered judgment of the council of the Society – more than sufficient to mark Don as a most worthy recipient of life membership of the Geographical Society of New South Wales. I have only one regret this evening, which is that for medical reasons Don can't be here with us. Unfortunately, he has recently had eye surgery, and he is unable to travel for a while. It is therefore in Don's absence that I ask you to join with me in congratulating one of the Society's 'true greats' on the award of this most well deserved honour – Dr Don Biddle.