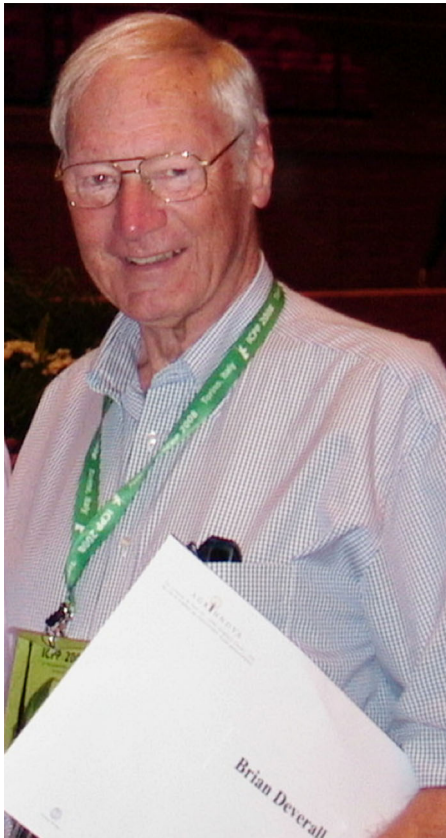


Obituary: Emeritus Professor Brian James Deverall, 1935–2014

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Brian Deverall was Emeritus Professor of Plant Pathology at The University of Sydney. His pioneering research explored the cellular and biochemical interactions between plants and their microbial parasites, especially the roles of phytoalexins and systemic acquired resistance in plant defence. He was a Fellow of the American Phytopathological Society (1999) and the Australasian Plant Pathology Society (2009), and the International Society of Plant Pathology (2008). His 123 books, chapters and papers were cited 2008 times, he held one patent (with Kirsty Owen), and achieved an h-index of 26. These are the career stats of a giant of our profession.

Brian was born on 3 January in 1935 in the Merseyside town of Birkenhead, England. At that time, his father, William James Deverall, a life-long employee of Unilever, was working in nearby Port Sunlight, a model town built by Lever Brothers to accommodate workers in its soap factory. During the war years, Brian's family moved frequently around England and Wales, while the most stable period of his childhood was spent in Lymm, where he attended the Lymm Grammar School for all of his secondary schooling.

In 1957 he was awarded a BSc (First Class) in Botany, Chemistry and Zoology from the University of Edinburgh. The exceptionally high standards that Brian was noted for throughout his career in plant pathology continued from this point. He embarked upon his post-graduate studies at Imperial College, London, where he had the fortune to work closely with a father of physiological plant pathology, Professor RKS Wood. In 1960 he was awarded his DIC (Diploma of Imperial College) and PhD for his investigation on the growth of fungal hyphae in the leaves of broad bean (*Vicia faba*). His PhD was notable for two outcomes. The first of these

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was his description of how the pathogen induced symptoms, published as a Letter to the prestigious journal, *Nature* (Deverall, 1961). Most scientists aspire to one *Nature* paper during their careers, so beginning his career in Plant Pathology with a *Nature* paper was a sign of enormous potential. The second notable outcome was his discovery that the chocolate spot fungus, *Botrytis fabae*, colonised broad bean leaves because it could detoxify induced plant antibiotics called phytoalexins, whereas the closely related *B. cinerea* could not. This was the first demonstration of the critical role of phytoalexins, and was the forerunner to his pioneering research in plant defence.

While at Imperial College in 1958, Brian met a beautiful and vivacious Australian student, Flora Lloyd, herself pursuing a DIC in Botany, and they married in 1960. Brian and Flora spent 1960–62 in the USA when he took up a Harkness Fellowship to work with Professor JC Walker at University of Wisconsin (Madison), and with Dr JM Daly at the University of Nebraska (Lincoln), studying differential oxygen uptake in bean leaves resistant and susceptible to the bacterial disease, halo blight, and wheat leaves infected with rust. During this visit he established many of the enduring international linkages that became important in his later career. His exposure to the exciting discoveries in the rapidly emerging field of plant-parasite interactions was a key factor in his determination to help convene the first International Congress of Plant Pathology in London in 1968, and he attended all but one of the five-yearly Congresses that followed until his last in Turin in 2008.

In 1969 he published the elegant and informative *Fungal Parasitism*, a concise monograph that still presents one of the clearest explanations of the fundamental nature of the interaction between fungi and plants available. With his colleague Tom Preece he established a new journal in 1971, *Physiological Plant Pathology*, as a vehicle for publishing discoveries in this emerging field of research. An outstandingly clear and precise writer, and an excellent and skilled editor, Brian served on Editorial and Advisory Boards of several influential journals through his career.

He and Flora returned to the UK with their new son Lloyd, and from 1962 to 1970 Brian was Lecturer in the Department of Botany and Plant Technology at Imperial College. Here he resumed working with RKS Wood to further explore the nature and function of phytoalexins, for which he was awarded the Huxley Prize for Research Achievements in 1971.

From 1970 to 1972 Brian was Principal Scientific Officer, Agricultural Research Council Unit on Systemic Fungicides, Wye College, University of London, under the direction of Dr

Louis Wain. In 1973 he was recruited to replace Professor Neville White, who had retired as the first Professor of Plant Pathology at The University of Sydney. He held this position until his retirement in 2001 when he became Emeritus Professor. He also took responsibility for a number of administrative positions in the Faculty of Agriculture and the University, and while he did not particularly enjoy faculty politics and deal making, he was both a good administrator and a fair and supportive leader. He was an inspiring teacher of senior-level courses in plant-pathogen interactions and an outstanding supervisor of research students. In a tribute published in 2009, his student Liz Dann noted, “If sought, his opinion or advice is always very insightful, concise, considered and much appreciated” (Dann, 2009). He had a special ability to gently challenge and nurture his students. His comments were always thought-provoking and sometimes cryptic, and his questions often left me pondering for days or weeks until I got it.

In many ways moving to Australia challenged Brian. It’s worth remembering that 40 years ago there was no internet or email, and the loss of daily contact with leaders of the rapidly emerging field he had such a pivotal role establishing must have left Brian feeling a little like Governor Phillip 200 years previously. Australia was very different to the northern hemisphere, and he brought his unique experience, rigour and inquiring and resourceful mind to develop rich collaborations with wheat, cotton and horticulture researchers here. In 1977 he wrote *Defence Mechanisms of Plants*, and in 1982 he chaired a CSIRO Committee of Review of Plant Pathology Research in Australia. He continued to serve his profession as President of the Australasian Plant Pathology Society (1987–89), Vice-President of the International Society of Plant Pathology (1988–93) and as Editor of the ISPP Newsletter (1994–2000 and 2008–2014).

One great comfort for Brian was the fact that his great sporting passion, cricket, was also played in Australia. In Sydney he played with the Radio Physics Cricket Club as a tall, elegant Right-Hand batsman and a very economical and enquiring offspin bowler, and he enjoyed his annual pilgrimage to the Adelaide Australia Day Test. As with his perspective on science, cricketering conversations with Brian always took me to a new level of understanding.

Brian’s health declined over the past year and he was recently diagnosed with Progressive Supranuclear Palsy (PSP). He died peacefully, though unexpectedly, on 9 August and is survived by Flora, his children Lloyd, Sarah and David, his brother Philip and seven grandchildren. His awards and honours reflect Brian’s profound, unique and remarkable impacts on science, his students, colleagues and his profession. As his student I am forever grateful for his wisdom and

friendship, for the freedom and responsibility I was given to follow my research interests, and for the doors he quietly opened for me. In the words of his colleague and friend, Beijing-based, Professor Tang Wenhua, “Brian was a great scientist. I respect him. He is in my heart.”

Valé Prof, it’s been a great innings.

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