



Obituary

Donald Sidney Biddle

AM, BA (Hons), MEd., PhD, FRGS, FNGTA, FNGS, FACE

12 March 1923–21 January 2022

Aged 98 years

Nick Hutchinson

When Don Biddle passed away, the Australian Geography Teachers Association (AGTA) lost an incomparable link with its origins; a source of wise counsel for its executive members; a teacher and academic who passionately promoted geography, the Association and other professional geographical organisations, the teaching profession, and Australian curricula; and inspired others to follow his lead.

Barrie McElroy remembered Don:

All of us who knew Don personally from the 1960s onward speak of the same wonderful person:

- first and foremost, his gentle, unpretentiously generous friendship and mentoring;
- secondly, his brilliant contribution to his profession.

Don's keen intelligence and kindly wisdom informed his great contributions to geography, geographic education and curriculum as an academic and administrator. Many of us had the pleasure of working with him and learned so much. There are many teachers and academics who never met Don and yet *knew* him through his insightful writings and contributions to geography and curricula. His splendid two-volume PhD thesis blazed the trail for many of us who followed in his footsteps.

Don's AM (Member of the Order of Australia) was awarded in 2002 "for service to education through the administration of the Sydney Teachers' College, and to the field of geography through the development of curricula and participation in professional geographical organisations." Don's academic qualifications are impressive: BA (Hons) Sydney, 1950; MEd. Sydney, 1964; and PhD London, 1974. He was Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, Fellow of the Australian College of Educators, 1978, and Fellow of the Geography Teachers Association of New South Wales and Geographical Society of New South Wales, 1988. Furthermore, as Grant Kleeman eloquently observed, "his peers awarded him

the Macdonald Holmes Medal in 1979 for distinguished contribution to geographical education in Australia, Hong Kong, New Zealand and England" (Kleeman, 2002).

Joining Sydney Teachers' College in 1957, he progressed from Senior Lecturer to Principal Lecturer, Deputy Vice Principal, Vice Principal to Principal to retire from the then Sydney College of Advanced Education in 1984. As Barrie McElroy remarked, "Our admiration extended to his role as an administrator at the Sydney Teachers' College and later the Sydney College of Advanced Education. Despite challenging times in Higher Education his intelligence, compassion, and wisdom always won through."

Don also made time for professional geographical organisations including Geography Teachers Association of New South Wales President 1963–1970, Geographical Society of New South Wales President 1970–1972, 1979–1982, and the establishment of AGTA in 1967 where he was President 1967–1969 and editor of *Geographical Education* between 1970 and 1979. According to then President, Robert Coggins, "Volume 1, Number 2 was published during 1970 under the editorship of Mr D. S. Biddle. Favourable comments on its quality and format have been received from many sources inside and outside of the affiliated associations" (Coggins, 1971, p. 206).

It is a long stretch from Don's RAAF war service in 1940s Borneo, where he was called *Snowy* because of his blond hair, to the impressive 1974 PhD thesis entitled *An investigation into the use of curriculum theory in the formulation of a systems model for constructing and evaluating secondary school geography curricula in England and Wales* (Biddle, 1974b), to the establishment of the AGTA Dr Don Biddle Friend of Geography Award in 2010. This award recognises, through peer nomination, those who make a significant and sustained contribution to the work of the Association and promote geographical education across Australia, and then on to the award of Geographical Society of New South

Wales Life Membership, in 2014, where Don was addressed as “one of the true ‘greats’ of Australian geography and geographical education” (Codrington, 2014).

Norman Graves remembers,

I owe him a considerable debt of gratitude, as though I was officially his PhD thesis supervisor, I benefited as much from his superb intellect as he may have done from my comments on his research. He was a pioneer in the field of curriculum planning in geography, and what developments came later relied on his work. Others are better able to comment on his work in Sydney Teachers’ College, but I was aware of how well he handled the difficult situation prior to his becoming Director. He was not only a superb academic, his humanity was evident in all his actions. We were of the same generation, and enjoyed each other’s company; he and Eileen spent many evenings with Mireille and I when they were in London. He invited me to stay with them when I attended the 1988 IGU Congress in Sydney. His devotion to his wife during the years she was handicapped was absolute.

Mark Manuel observed “I feel so proud and privileged to be one of the first recipients of the Friend of Geography award [bearing Don Biddle’s name] in 2011” and Alaric Maude explained, “I

have several awards, but the one I value most is the AGTA Don Biddle Friend of Geography Award, because it came from teachers.”

Stephen Codrington explained that Don

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 (Codrington, 2014).

Don’s support of AGTA and geography curricula has been numerous and diverse. Lindsay Francis described Don as “one of the truly great figures of geography and geographical education in Australia. His influence stretched far beyond NSW



[L-R] Roger Smith, Dr Don Biddle, Mark Manuel at the 2011 AGTA Conference in Adelaide, the occasion when Roger and Mark received the inaugural AGTA Don Biddle Friend of Geography Award.

both through his writings and his interactions with others.” Lindsay went further, “I had the pleasure of working with Don at AGTA as well as a number of conferences, seminars and workshops. Don supported and encouraged me in my early years. This professional and personal interaction was the experience of so many.”

In the 1950s, there was a determined and apparently persuasive move towards a generalist approach to the biophysical and social sciences in school curricula. Don revealed that teachers qualified in the disciplines “who had not been included in the discussions, argued that it was more logical to improve teaching methods rather than eliminate disciplines from the curriculum” (Biddle, 1992b, p. 38). Thus, the knowledge, skills and values provided by geography would gradually disappear. Indeed, the implementation of the Wyndham Scheme in New South Wales in 1960, necessitated a Social Studies Committee charged with preparing a compulsory Social Studies course from Years 7 to 10. And, “similar decisions were pending in other states.” Teachers turned to geography teachers’ associations to lobby parents and employers concerning the rights of students to exercise choice among the social science disciplines. Such concerns were presented in the Geography Section of the 36th Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) Congress held in Sydney, in 1962. They were further developed in the 1967 ANZAAS Congress in Melbourne where representatives of Geography Teachers Association of Queensland (GTAQ), Geography Teachers Association of New South Wales (GTANSW), Geography Teachers Association of Victoria (GTAV) and the Geography Teachers Association of South Australia (GTASA) presented a series of papers, subsequently published as *Geography in the senior forms* (Biddle & Collins, 1967).

It was further decided to hold an inaugural meeting of the National Geography Teachers Association on 10 June 1967, organised by the GTAV. One year on, the first AGTA conference was held over three days, 30, 31 August and 1 September 1968, in a single lecture room at Sydney Teachers’ College, the very College where Don was Vice Principal, and where he presented a paper “The changing nature of geography in the secondary school” (Biddle, 1969b). From Volume 1, Number 2, Don assumed editorship of *Geographical Education* and was instrumental in editing a book of readings, *Readings in geographical education, Volume 1, 1954–1966* (Biddle, 1968) published by AGTA and Whitcombe and Tombs.

Don contributed to the text: “The purpose of teaching geography in the secondary school,”

“Local area studies in the secondary school” (with Catherine D. J. Stimson), “An approach to biogeography and climatology in the lower forms of the secondary school,” and “Examinations in geography in New South Wales.” What was as important as the content of the readings was Don’s initiative that members could produce publications for AGTA with the royalties used to assist in the publication of *Geographical Education*. In 1973, *Readings in geographical education, Volume II* (Biddle & Deer, 1973) was published with three contributions from Don: “Geographical education in New South Wales,” “Geographical education in the 1970s,” and “The quest for reliability in marking responses to essay questions in geography.”

Don’s writing contained clear, concise expositions of geography teaching, always teacher-focused but subtly moving geography teachers out of their comfort zones to appreciate that “geographical phenomena, both natural and cultural, are in a state of perpetual change and development,” that geography examinations incorporate aspects of “geographical method and test skills and understandings at different levels” and that “fieldwork must be organised and structured so that it encourages discovery learning” (Biddle, 1973, p. 12). The impact of Don’s endeavours was readily evident in geography classrooms with attention to maps, globes and diagrams, line drawings, filmstrips, motion film, weather stations, simple soil tests, and stories of travel and adventure. Two more texts developed with colleagues at Sydney Teachers’ College—*Local geography in the secondary school* (Stimson et al., 1962) and *The language of topographic maps* (Biddle et al., 1974)—were ground breaking geography texts. The former contained detailed colour photographs of numerous aspects of the inner-city townscapes of Glebe in Sydney and quite outstanding cartography depicting scores of aspects of the geographical features of Dubbo and its region. The latter text, an absolute gem, was lavishly illustrated with map extracts, aerial photographs, early satellite imagery, cross sections, transects, compass orientation exercises, and clear step-by-step instructions. Clearly, Don and his colleagues had moved geography far from the “person who has filed away in his memory the location of such unfamiliar places as ‘Baldy Bill’, ‘Ward’s Mistake’, and ‘Old Koomooloo’ . . . , and can readily conjure up from memory the types of landforms, climate and major products in each of these remote areas” (Biddle, 1969b, p. 1).

In his more cerebral approaches to the development of school geography curriculum, Don initially prepared material on pre-existing geography syllabuses to “look closely at new data and concepts, discuss them in relation to

effective teaching, and arrive at an understanding of the ways to lift the general level of courses and teaching” (Biddle & Shortle, 1969, p. ix). *Programme planning in geography* (Biddle & Shortle, 1969) provided a plethora of approaches to the syllabuses in geography issued by the New South Wales Department of Education (1966) in order to simplify the tasks of teachers developing programs best suited to the aptitudes and abilities of their geography students. Don broadened the scope to examine the landscape approach included in Queensland, Victorian and New South Wales syllabuses, and the concept-focused approach in South Australia (Biddle & Shortle, 1969) to expound more fully on the fundamental concepts of geography. He also wrote about the use of systems theory in the teaching of geography in the senior school. This theory encompassed analytical systems, which referred to the models that geographers used to understand phenomena such as the hydrological cycle, stream orders, agricultural location and the functional morphology of cities. Don further examined a systems approach to geographical education in his PhD thesis (Biddle, 1974b), and a paper published in 1976, “Translating curriculum theory into practice in geographical education: A systems approach” (Biddle, 1976c).

Other approaches were revealed in “Paradigms in geography” (Biddle, 1976b), particularly conceptual models for geography curriculum development based on the landscape, spatial organisation and environmental perception paradigms. Don was here delving into the key facts, concepts, principles and structures of geography as well as what one is permitted to say about the discipline and how new knowledge is introduced and accepted in the geographical community. He believed that practising teachers needed to be aware of the nature of the paradigms they had internalised as a result of educational experiences and worldviews and be prepared to accept that some paradigms become unacceptable to people working in the frontier of the discipline. Don’s paper “Paradigms and geography curricula in England and Wales 1882–1972” (Biddle, 1980b) built again on his PhD thesis to offer lessons for Australian geography teachers. By 1972, three geographical viewpoints were identified in England and Wales: the spatial, the man-environment [*sic*], and the regional, which were equivalent to three paradigms identified in Don’s 1976 paper: spatial organisation, ecosystem and regional systems (Biddle, 1976a). Moreover, there was considerable support for a curriculum organised around spatial concepts, i.e., spatial location, spatial distribution and spatial relations. However, geography was more traditionally regarded “as a subject which provided linkages among the physical, biological and social sciences, and where the emphasis

has tended to be on the physical background of human events” (Biddle, 1980b, pp. 592–593).

During what Don calls AGTA’s consolidation phase, such deep knowledge of curriculum development was highly relevant to teachers “because the emphasis had moved from centre-based to school-based curriculum development” and curriculum developers overseas “were impressed with curriculum papers published in *Geographical Education*” (Biddle, 2006, p. 15). In 1974, Don presented “A systems approach to curriculum development in geography” at Palmerston North, for the New Zealand Geographical Society (Biddle, 1974a) and in 1976, he presented “Landscape and ecosystem: a conceptual model for a geography curriculum” at the University of Hong Kong Symposium on geography and the environment in Southeast Asia (Biddle, 1976a).

In 1974, Don represented the International Geographical Union Commission on Geographical Education in Palmerston North and was subsequently invited to take part in conferences organised by the Commission on Geographical Education in 1980 at the Twenty-fourth congress in Tokyo where Don presented on curriculum models (Biddle, 1980a). Don was co-host, with Tony Milne, for the 1988 Commission in Sydney.

Don continued to write on curricula in various texts: “Improving geography teaching through program planning: An approach to pre-service and in-service education” (Biddle, 1990); “An Australian example: A case study of curriculum change” (Biddle, 1992a); and “Theories and practices in the development of curricula in geography” (Biddle, 1996b). In 1996 and 1997, he wrote “Geography in schools in England and Wales: 1960–66, Implications for geographical education in Australia (Parts 1 & 2)” (Biddle, 1996a, 1997). In 1999, he wrote a lengthy report commissioned by the National Committee for Geography and the Australian Academy of Science, entitled *Geography in schools* which compared the place of geography in New South Wales to geography curricula in selected countries: England and Wales, Finland, United States of America, Japan and Hong Kong (Biddle, 1999). As late as 2003, Don was still commenting on curriculum and the Geographical Society of New South Wales initiative to support the New South Wales Stage 6 geography syllabus at a conference entitled *Conference on geography’s new frontiers* (Biddle, 2003).

Don wrote about the beginnings of AGTA in 1992, “Australian Geography Teachers’ Association: beginnings” (Biddle, 1992b), and again to mark the 40th anniversary of AGTA “The Australian Geography Teachers Association: A review”

(Biddle, 2006, 2007). Well might it be said by Stephen Codrington “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” (Codrington, 2014). As David Moyle observed, “We have all benefited from Don's inspiring teaching and writing and it is sad to see his passing although 98 is a really good innings.”

Susan Bliss explained that

North Sydney Boys' High School was a Demonstration School for Sydney Teachers' College students and overseas teachers. An Indonesian teacher stated “your students respond so well to your lessons—not like in Indonesia.” Interestingly, Don had a few tricks up his sleeve—“put your left hand up if you do not know the answer, and the right hand up if you know the answer.”

Don skilfully ensured effective classroom responses to his lessons by engaging students to research the topic before the demonstration lesson. On one occasion five students, who were delivering a lesson on Java to Indonesian teachers, visited the Mitchell Library to research questions and answers on the topic. Remember there was no Internet or Google in those days!

Don's superb lessons, impressed the inspector who promoted him as Head of Department to Glen Innes High School.

Stephen Codrington (2014) described Don “as an inspirational educator, a humane and compassionate examiner, an energetic and inspired researcher, a prolific writer and speaker, a thoroughly authentic geographer.”

Rob Berry explained that “Don had an incredible influence on geographical education in Australia and far beyond. His contribution to AGTA and member associations was enormous and his legacy will live on for generations.”

The last words should go to Susan Bliss and Peter Skinner.

Susan Bliss

Professional, empathetic and a gentleman, Don was my mentor for over 60 years. As young Teachers' College students, we were encouraged by Don to join the Geography Teachers Association, accentuating the significance and value of ongoing professional development for effective teaching and student learning.

Don organised an exceptional field trip for geography students at Sydney Teachers' College. Rules were laid down—no “hanky panky” or alcohol (pre-drug era). The enterprising young boys in the group arranged a car containing alcohol to be deposited near the site a few days beforehand. In the middle of the night the boys invaded the girls' dorm drunk, loaded with forbidden supplies. Don intuitively aware of the night activities came knocking on the door triggering boys to scamper and hide in wardrobes and under beds. The calm, aware Don ignored the situation and wished us a pleasant night. However, it was effective as the boys soon scattered and the young naive girls were relieved as they were unskilled at handling the situation—unlike today's youth.

Over the years, Don frequently offered advice, with his usual rigour, concerning my doctorate, the Global Education Project and my role as the geographer on the executive of the Asia Educator Teachers' Association and Primary Social Science Association. He encouraged me to write articles and present university lectures. Don often invited me to his home where we would sit for hours in his large upstairs library, containing abundant geographical knowledge and data, while Eileen his wife provided refreshments. At one stage he even offered me his library which I declined as I was in the process of downsizing and already possessed too many books!

Don was also director of the Manly Warringah Leagues Club's (Seagulls) academic committee awarding scholarships to Year 11 and 12 students and university students. He engineered my position on the committee with a view that I would take over from him after he retired.

John, my husband, became a close friend of Don's, transporting him to functions, rewriting information from the various geographical organisations in 16-point font as his eyesight was deteriorating, and even witnessing recent changes to his will.

Around Christmas I would visit him with a bottle of wine and home-made Christmas cake and pudding, as his wife was blind and had difficulties walking. Unfortunately, the recent COVID pandemic restricted these visits.

I was fortunate to have enjoyed many dinners with Don. Specifically memorable was dinner at a plush restaurant in Adelaide during the AGTA Conference. At dinner he reminisced about his old friends he had met that day, as well as the food, wine and particularly the affogato. However, he was travelling with a

walking stick, and I was concerned how we would safely reach our accommodation. Yes, Don loved his wine. Not a good combination with a walking stick! Always generous, we would frequently receive bottles of red wine.

I now sit on my verandah observing Long Reef, remembering Don's field excursion to the site that opened my eyes to the dynamic ocean processes and resultant landscapes. While viewing the scene I will drink a toast to the memory of a most remarkable man!

Peter Skinner

In 1967, nearing the completion of training at Sydney Teachers' College as a Geography teacher and filled with enthusiasm for entering the profession, a mate and I collaborated on our final major field assignment, a multi-day transect of Lynch's Creek in the Blue Mountains National Park.

Faculty had judged this a fine idea. What perhaps was not such a fine idea was that we secretly took a .22 calibre rifle with us, headed off from the College Camp and began work. And a little target practice along the way.

Naturally we became lost and one of the worst nights of my life was huddled in freezing cold in the arms of another man, with only a few miserable topographic maps as blankets.

In the early morning light we emerged onto a track torn, cut and blistered but mercifully un-shot into searchers from Police, what is now SES and, of course the furious faces of our lecturers.

Baying for blood they sent us packing to Sydney in disgrace.

Arraigned some days later before the "Head of Department" at Sydney Teachers' College, we were to be cashiered and sent down.

But Don Biddle had done his research, noted that we had the highest reviews for our "prac teaching" and, whilst not quite doing justice to the Lynch's Creek transect, had some redeeming qualities.

He ruled we would stay, on probation, and would graduate which we ultimately did as "Junior Secondary Geography Teachers."

Later of course I had the privilege of working with Don at the Geography Teachers Association, watched him take us through the difficulty of incorporation, and be on hand as mentor, guide and friend.

Had Don terminated my scholarship in 1967 it would have broken my heart. I hope I've done him justice since, this humble and loveliest of men. Farewell Don and thank you from the centre of my being for allowing me to pursue the noblest profession on earth.

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