



Respected professor had magnetic attributes

ROBERT STREET, AO

Physicist
16-12-1920 - 4-7-2013

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Robert Street, who has died aged 92, was the foundation professor of physics at Monash University in 1960 and a leading magnetism researcher. Robert – or Bob, as he was affectionately known to all – was a much-admired physicist and widely respected in Australian science circles.

Robert was born in 1920 in Yorkshire, England. In 1941, he received a BSc from the University of London. He began his career during WWII, working at the Air Defence Research and Development Establishment in Malvern, Worcestershire, researching “absolute measurement of power”. In 1944 and 1948, respectively, he received an MSc in the relatively new area of wave mechanics and a PhD on absolute measurement of power.

Robert was appointed assistant lecturer in physics at the University College, Nottingham, and began investigating the effects of magnetic fields on the mechanical properties of magnetic materials. In 1954, he took up the position of senior lecturer at Sheffield University.

In 1960, Robert moved with his family to Australia to take up the foundation chair in the Department of Physics at Monash University. He had oversight of the development of teaching courses and laboratory equipment, research areas and appointment of academic and professional staff.

The early inhabitants of the department all had happy memories of their times together, with Bob as a mentor and very good friend – he fostered a research and teaching environment with the hallmarks of cohesion,

co-operation and camaraderie. With his wise stewardship he was a guiding light for staff and students for whose wellbeing he always showed concern. Under his leadership the department grew into an outstanding research and teaching centre.



Robert was a pioneer in science education through the development of the Victorian physics curriculum; science communication through an ABC TV science program; professional development through the Australian Institute of Physics; and science policy and funding through his work with the Australian Atomic Energy Commission, the National Standards Commission, chair of the Metric Conversion Board (as the man who brought us metres and kilograms) and chair of the ARGC (precursor to the Australian Research Council).

Following his time at Monash, in 1974 Robert took up the directorship of the Research School of Physical Sciences at the Australian National University in Canberra. Under his leadership, the Anglo-Australian telescope was established.

In 1978, Robert took up the position of vice-chancellor at the University of Western Australia, enjoying the many opportunities of academic and administrative engagement offered there.

When he retired from this position in 1986, Robert stayed in Western Australia and opened a new chapter in his scientific career, returning to the laboratory to take measurements. In 1988, he set up a magnetism laboratory at UWA, publishing papers, supervising students and post-doctoral fellows, attracting Australian Research Council grants, producing patents and becoming a member of one of Australia’s earliest nano-





technology companies, Advanced Powder Technology.

Professor Street received numerous awards, including honorary DScs and fellowship of the Australian Academy of Science. He was made an officer of the Order of Australia in 1985, in recognition of his enormous contributions to Australian education. He was a great man, much admired for his intellect, passion for science and his humanity. He was an inspiration to students, both for the way he engaged with them outside the classroom, as well as for the clarity of his teaching. He was deeply and genuinely interested in people.

Apart from his deep knowledge and passion for physics, he had many other interests. He was a keen cricketer until his mid-40s, though despite being eligible by birth, not at a level to play for his beloved Yorkshire county team. He was a keen but not particularly successful fly fisherman, enjoying much more productivity from his large vegetable garden, developed in retirement. He took great pleasure from classical music, especially opera, and reading, to be replaced by audio books when he developed macular degeneration.

His younger brother, Ronald (Ron), who was an RAF bomber pilot in Burma during World War II and subsequently a career airman, died in 2010. Bob is survived by his wife of 70 years, Joan, a fellow University of London graduate whom he met when they were students and evacuated to Bristol. Joan worked at Bletchley Park before their marriage and then at the Telecommunications Research Establishment in Malvern. Bob often acknowledged Joan's many supportive contributions to his career.

He is survived also by their two children, Alison and Nicholas, both medical graduates of Monash University, and two grandchildren, Simon and Catherine, to whom Bob was very close. A celebration of his life was conducted in Perth.