

Roderick (Rod) Leon Bielecki

3 August 1931 – 15 November 2016



Obituaries are important to historians as they provide a synopsis of an individual's major achievements, often in just a specific field of endeavour. All too often they are brief, leaving us with little more than a silhouette of the person.

Rod was an outstanding scientist with an international reputation particularly in plant physiology. Happily the quality of his work was recognised by significant awards made at appropriate intervals during his career. These will be detailed below.

Rod was inspirational and touched many people during his lifetime. The outcomes of such connections tend to be intangible and certainly impossible to quantify. First and foremost Rod was a wonderful husband for Val, and father of his high achieving daughters Karen and Lisa, of whom he was intensely proud.

In his eloquent valedictory address at Rod's funeral, Ross Ferguson, former Vice President of the RNZIH, acknowledged Rod's role as a generous mentor to himself and others. Unquestionably, I also owe a great deal to the support and encouragement of Rod and his family, both with regard to me becoming a full time plant breeder and in my personal life.

I first met Rod shortly after I joined the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR) at Mount Albert; now half a century ago. Rod had just returned from study in California. He was at that time noticeable, both for his mid-Pacific accent and the size and fluorescent colour of the American cars he chose to drive.

From the outset I was attracted to Rod's obvious intellect and knowledge plus his enthusiasm for anything that he tackled. I have long maintained that a true master in any field of study will have the ability to explain their speciality,

however arcane, to any intelligent layperson in terms they will understand. Rod was the very best example of someone with this ability. When I wrote a book concerning soil and related plant nutrition, I had no hesitation in asking Rod to ensure that it was both fully accurate and comprehensible to home gardeners.

Rod and Val both had an interest in recreational horticulture going far beyond Rod's professional involvement with plant science, and extending 20 years past his retirement from the DSIR in 1996. This interest had many facets ranging from a notable garden in South Auckland, special interest in a variety of genera and active involvement in various horticultural organisations such as the New Zealand Camellia Society, Friends of the Auckland Botanic Garden and Auckland Begonia Circle. Active indeed! Long-time Registrar of New Zealand Camellia cultivar names, just on twenty years editing the Friends' Newsletter as well as contributing many wide ranging articles and ten years doing the same for the Begonia Circle.

I was fortunate to be able to work under Rod when he took on the role of Director of the Horticulture and Processing Division of DSIR in the early 1980s. This was a time when commercial horticulture was booming following the success of kiwifruit as an export crop.

At the outset Rod demonstrated his vision by organising internal conferences so that his teams within the organisation might collectively determine how to best serve the horticultural industry in New Zealand, but at the same time ensure an ongoing commitment to pure science. This was one example of Rod as a team player. Another was his enthusiastic participation in somewhat boisterous games of volleyball during lunch breaks.

It has to be acknowledged that Rod did not suffer fools easily, especially bureaucrats. It was perhaps unfortunate that Rod took on the role of Director, perhaps reluctantly, at a time when science in New Zealand was being pushed towards the inappropriate corporate model of science that now prevails.

Chronology

Rod was born in Auckland to Tracy and Marjorie Bielecki. His father was a printer with French heritage, whose business ran for a long time in Newmarket. Rod was the oldest of four, two brothers Paul and Neil, and sister Yvonne. He attended Auckland Grammar School on scholarship and the University of Auckland also on scholarships, where he met his wife to be.

He was awarded a B.Sc. (Botany and Chemistry) in 1949 an M.Sc. (Regeneration of Kauri) in 1955 both from Auckland. Ph.D. (Physiology of Sugarcane) University of Sydney 1959.

- 1958: Joined Fruit Research Division, DSIR
- 1960–61: Senior Fulbright Scholar in the Department of Subtropical Horticulture at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA)
- 1966: Awarded New Zealand Association of Scientists Research Medal
- 1969–70: Visiting Research Fellowship, Department of Nuclear Medicine and Radiation Biology, UCLA
- 1973: Elected Fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand
- 1980–88: Director, Division of Horticulture and Processing, DSIR
- 1984: Awarded Hector Medal, the Royal Society of New Zealand
- 1992: Awarded D.Sc. University of Sydney
- 1992–95: President of New Zealand Society for Horticultural Science
- 1996: Elected Associate of Honour, Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture
- 1996–99: Member, Trust Board, Auckland Museum
- 2010: Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to horticultural science.

**Obituary prepared by
Dr Keith Hammett**