

Obituaries

Sydney “Charlie” Challenger

27 October 1922 – 21 September 2007



Charlie Challenger received Lincoln University's highest award in 2002 – an Honorary Doctorate in Natural Resources. Photo courtesy Lincoln University.

Challenger founded landscape architecture in New Zealand

The founding father of the landscape architecture profession in New Zealand has died at his Little River home. He was 84.

Charlie (real name Sydney) Challenger launched Australasia's first full-time post-graduate course in landscape architecture at Lincoln University in 1969. He was the driving force behind the establishment of the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects in 1972.

In his 25-year retirement, Challenger established an alpine plants nursery and designed his rambling but enchanting home in Little River's Okuti Valley.

He was a father figure to his students and respected internationally in the profession.

Challenger was born in Leeds and grew up in the Forest of Dean, in Gloucestershire, England. He developed a love of the countryside and treasured his memories of cycling excursions in the West Country.

Serving as a bomb aimer with the Royal Air Force in India, Burma and Indo-China in World War 2, he attracted the nickname Charpie. This was a corruption of charpoy, the Indian name for a bed. It reflected his inclination to lie in bed when he should be “up and doing”. Charpie became Charlie and the name stuck.

He returned to India for two years after the war as an air force education officer.

Challenger graduated in horticulture at the University of Reading, then worked for a large horticultural firm in Surrey, before taking a lecturing position at the University of Bristol.

He married Pat and, although he was already interested in alpine plants and contributed articles on them to gardening magazines, the couple's tiny flat in central Bristol allowed a garden of only two pieces of tufa and a few rock plants.

They emigrated to New Zealand in 1956 and Challenger began his long association with Lincoln University – from lecturing in horticultural science to the award of an honorary doctorate in natural resources, in 2002, to his son Neil succeeding him on the staff.

Challenger became head of Lincoln's horticulture department in 1962. By then, he had developed an interest in landscape architecture, which he pursued on a trip to Sweden in 1963. Impressed by landscape designs there, and seeing a need for something similar in New Zealand, he advocated the establishment of a landscape architecture course at Lincoln.

The university accepted his proposal and gave him leave to study landscape architecture in England. He graduated with distinction from the University of Newcastle and returned to Lincoln in 1968 to set up the course.

Challenger used to remark on the difficulty in breaking through the public perception of landscape architecture as “a fancy form of gardening”. He said his first graduates were “apostles who had to sell themselves to people who were suspicious of them”.

Keen to have his profession recognised, he took a leading role in establishment of the NZ Institute of Landscape Architects and in gaining acceptance of it by the international federation. He remained active in the group, editing its newsletters and journal.

The institute honoured him with life membership in 1982 and named its supreme landscape planning award after him.

Prominent Christchurch landscape architect Di Lucas says Challenger was the inspiration for the profession in New Zealand.

“We owe our skills, commitment and passion to Charlie's teachings and leadership. New Zealand landscape architects are often seen as world leaders in the profession. Charlie should be credited with that. The successful establishment of landscape architecture in New Zealand germinated from Charlie's ground-breaking course,” Lucas says.

Graduate Robin Gay says Challenger was “absolutely stimulating and had an amazing sense of what New Zealand should be doing and where we should be going with our landscape”.

Graduate Gordon Griffin says every lecture by Challenger was a work of art. Students “marvelled at the ideals and vision and zeal and beauty of his lectures and his self”, he says.

Challenger kept up a high workload at Lincoln but took retirement at 60 because he “wanted to be active

and alive". He then redesigned his large section at Little River, putting into practice his ideals of capitalising on natural features and ensuring environmental sustainability.

He and his wife grew more than 1000 alpine rock plants and probably the largest number of crocus species and cultivars in New Zealand in their grounds and nursery.

Pat Challenger says her husband had interests outside landscape architecture, including collecting books, but "the profession was nearly his whole life".

He was a founder and long-time member of the then Canterbury Alpine Garden Society (CAGS) which is now the New Zealand Alpine Garden Society (NZAGS).

"He was a little idiosyncratic. He had strong opinions about people. If he liked them, he liked them. When you got to know him he had a very good sense of humour," Pat says.

* Sydney (Charlie) Challenger, born Leeds, England, October 27, 1922; died Little River, September 21, 2007. Survived by wife Pat, sons Ian, Neil and Stuart and four grandchildren.

Mike Crean

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Ian Collins of Lincoln University also prepared an obituary for Charlie Challenger (www.lincoln.ac.nz/story22461.html).

Charlie Challenger's role as "Father of Landscape Architecture in New Zealand" was outlined in an article written by Shona McCahon the month before Charlie passed away (*International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA) Newsletter*, August 2007, No. 72, pp. 6–7; see www.iflaonline.org/publications.php). A media release dated 24 September 2007 from the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects (NZILA) was largely based on this article (www.nzila.co.nz/challenger.htm).

He was a long-standing member of the RNZIH, and was made an associate of honour (AHRIH) in 1983 – see *Annual Journal (Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture)*, Vol. 11: p. 57. Charlie published many articles on landscape architecture, plants, garden history, and book reviews, including those in the RNZIH journal:

- 1974: Changes in the Canterbury landscape. *Annual Journal of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture* 2: 5–11.
- 1978: Studies of pioneer Canterbury nurserymen (1): William Wilson. *Annual Journal of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture* 6: 139–162.
- 1979: Studies of pioneer Canterbury nurserymen (2): Wilson's Major Competitors. *Annual Journal of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture* 7: 5–38.
- 1981: Book review: Miss Willmott of Warley Place. By Audrey le Lievre. *Annual Journal of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture* 9: 104–105.
- 1985: Landscapes and gardeners in early New Zealand. *Annual Journal of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture* 13: 58–65.
- 1986/87: Commercial availability of conifers in New Zealand 1851–1873. *Annual Journal of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture* 14: 76–85.
- 1989: The Banks Memorial Lecture, 1988: Amenity horticulture in Canterbury, 1850–1880. *Annual Journal of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture* 16: 54–59.
- 1996: The pleasures of *Crocus*. *New Zealand Garden Journal (Journal of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture)* 1(1): 12–17.
- 1996: Southern Alpines — an international alpine conference in New Zealand. *New Zealand Garden Journal (Journal of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture)* 1(3): 18–20.
- 1996: Book review: Early fruitgrowing in New Zealand. By Gerald Ward. *New Zealand Garden Journal (Journal of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture)* 1(4): 24.
- 1997: The joys of horticultural book collecting. *New Zealand Garden Journal (Journal of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture)* 2(1): 14–19.