



George Seddon
(1927–2007)

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George Seddon was born on 23 April 1927, at Berriwillock, Victoria, the second of four children and son of a bank manager who was related to the former New Zealand Prime Minister Richard Seddon. George's secondary schooling was as a scholarship boy at the Church of England Grammar School, Ballarat. In 1945, he started at Trinity College, Melbourne University, reading for a degree in English (tutored by Nonie Gibson, later Dame Leonie Kramer). Three years later, he graduated with a First, sharing the Dwight's Prize in the School of English Language and Literature.

His next few years were spent in Britain, Canada and on the Continent in a variety of posts, including work for the British Council in Portugal, at Winchester College, and at universities in Lisbon and Toronto. (He claimed to have been the first person ever to be appointed to Winchester specifically to teach English!) Through extensive travel and study, he acquired Portuguese, Spanish, French and German, and became fluent enough in Italian to be able to lecture in that language later on, perhaps assisted by his two years of Latin at Melbourne.

Returning to Australia in 1956, George took up a lectureship in English at the University of Western Australia and was subsequently promoted to senior lecturer. But while in Perth he determined to qualify in science also (in his 'spare time') and nearly completed a BSc with a major in geology, gaining distinctions all the way. Even before graduating, he was admitted to an MSc programme at the University of Minnesota, which he successfully completed in 1964. He quickly proceeded to the award of a PhD (1966), with a thesis on a stratigraphic problem in Texas, making use of the little-understood fossils called conodonts (which, however, are useful to stratigraphers as 'guide-fossils'). His work on conodonts is still regarded as significant by specialists.

The following year Seddon's career took another big shift, with his return to Western

Australia to take up a newly-created position in the Department of Philosophy, with a remit to establish history and philosophy of science courses. However, he was rapidly snapped up as a professor in the Geology and Geophysics Department at the University of Oregon, where he also undertook the planning for a Center for Environmental Studies. But again Australia called. He returned first to the University of Western Australia, following which he was appointed in 1971 to the chair of History and Philosophy of Science (HPS) at the University of New South Wales. I was then a junior staff member in the School and got to know George at that time, particularly because we had common interests in geology.

But I'm not sure that HPS was really George's *métier*. For much of the time he was with us he was working on his splendid book *Sense of Place* (1972), which grew from his (rightly) acclaimed *Swan River Landscapes* (1970), both of which books gave expression to his ideas about the environment and how humans should interact with it. Later came *A City and Its Setting: Images of Perth, Western Australia* (1986), which was based on the views of Perth and the Swan River estuary, as seen looking down obliquely from King's Park. History, literature, science and art, plus aesthetic sensibility mingled in a beguiling way in these books. Environmental Studies was George's real interest by the 1970s and he published little in front-line philosophy or in HPS journals (though he continued to publish in scientific journals for a time). I suspect that he did not like the straitjackets imposed by philosophy and HPS editors and, apart from his books, the less formal literary essay became his preferred vehicle for writing.

As things turned out, the UNSW chair became a stepping stone to the kind of job that George really wanted: Director of the new Centre for Environmental Studies, with the rank of full professor, at Melbourne University, a position he took up in 1974. His new group had to 'pay its way' by contract work. It did so triumphantly and the unit flourished, expanding from a staff of five to fourteen, and eventually becoming part of the School of Environmental Planning and the Faculty of Architecture. George's Centre drew on expertise from various parts of the University (and from overseas), as and when required, so that in effect it commissioned work from other departments. In time, his ideas and efforts left a permanent positive mark on Melbourne and the Victorian environment as for example in the establishment of cycle-ways, the rejuvenation of the Yarra River area, the siting of powerlines, the landscaping of coal-mining areas, or the control of the development of the Mornington Peninsula. More prosaically, one of the projects was concerned with the waste from some piggeries in Gippsland! More profoundly, his reach extended to Europe, with his analysis of the factors affecting the silting of the Venetian lagoon.

Thus in a position of new opportunity and authority, George's talents and enthusiasms were able to unite with notable success. He was, as already indicated, a student of English literature, philosopher, geoscientist, historian, linguist, and above all a man of aesthetic sensibility. He also had well-developed 'amateur' tastes, as in gardening,

botany and photography. When he later tackled his book *Searching for the Snowy* (1994), his historical skills shone through in his notably lucid account of the history of the Snowy River Scheme. As a geologist, George knew the value of fieldwork, so in preparation for this book he paddled his way down the Snowy in a canoe! He loved the Australian landscape and did his best to prevent it being wrecked. To this end, he brought his knowledge and appreciation of European architecture and urban design to bear on the problems of the Australian environment, while at the same time recognising the profound differences of geography, biology and history between Australia, the Americas and Europe. He continued to travel extensively through most of his life and had several short stints in various universities abroad.

George was a competent administrator, somewhat severe, but always fair. Thus it was that he became Dean of the Faculty of Architecture and Planning at Melbourne for five years from 1982 to 1987. The following year, he semi-retired to a position as Senior Honorary Research Fellow at the Centre for Studies of Australian Literature at the University of Western Australia. He purchased an old house and run-down garden in Fremantle, which gave him scope to express his evolving taste – with a discriminating restoration of the house and the development of a beautiful Italianate garden suited to Perth's Mediterranean climate. His earlier *Sense of Place* phase might have led one to expect that the plants would all have been Western Australian species; but he had moved on a bit in his thinking on such matters. (However, I'm told by his son that one of the plants he introduced has now become a widespread – but attractive – garden escape in Perth!)

George was, I think, such a success because he could bring so many gifts to bear on issues of great import for Australia, even if (or because?) he was by no means your typical academic specialist. He wrote plainly but elegantly, with perhaps a touch of self-conscious erudition. His abilities certainly did not go unrecognised. His list of honours and awards was long and varied, among which one might mention the Premier's Award (Historical and Critical Studies) and the Eureka Prize for his *Searching for the Snowy*; the Mawson Medal of the Australian Academy of Science, awarded in 1996, some considerable time after he had ceased active geological research, but in recognition of his understanding of how 'geology [could] be applied to a range of issues especially the reciprocal interaction between humans and their setting'; the Order of Australia; and architectural and planning awards too numerous to list here. His last book, *The Old Country: Australian Landscapes, Plants and People* (2005), was another gem of style and substance, beautifully illustrated by many of his own photographs and those of his much-respected colleague Colin Totterdell. In his characteristic manner, George talked about deep things in a manner that (almost) concealed his immense stock of knowledge.

While he did so much for the cultural and visual amenities of Fremantle, it should also be mentioned that in one terrible way the town treated George in a shocking

manner in that while walking home one evening he was mugged by some hoodlums, who were never identified. He received such severe head injuries that he might have died had he not been found on the steps of a church by a passer-by, and had he not had such a strong constitution. (He was a keen tennis player to the end of his life.) His wife has told me, jokingly, that after the assault he lost half his mental abilities – which brought him down to the level of most of the rest of us!

George married twice: in Toronto to Isabel Synge, a lady from an Irish family; and after their divorce in 1979 to an Australian Marli Wallace. He is survived by them both and by the two children from his first marriage, Jack and Polly. Towards the end of his life, George began to go blind in one eye, but did not lose his puckish sense of humour. The last contact I had with him was early in 2007 when I asked him to referee a paper. He did so with characteristic insight, at the same time wryly remarking that he could only offer a ‘one-eyed opinion’. I appreciated that.

I can claim credit for initiating George’s election to an honorary fellowship of the Academy. When I contacted him about the suggestion he seemed genuinely delighted and said that he had always thought of himself as a humanist. I say ‘Amen’ to that.

He died suddenly of a stroke on 9 May 2007, to the sorrow of all those who knew him. But it was fitting that his death occurred in the beautiful garden that he had created in Fremantle. He was buried in his tennis gear!

David Oldroyd

(I am grateful to Marli Wallace, Jack Seddon, Rod Home and Ray Marginson for their assistance in preparing this text.)