



GRADUATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO

William Alexander Robertson
Citation for Doctor of Science - Honoris Causa



Bill Robertson grew up on a sheep farm in the Wairau Valley near Blenheim. He attended Pine Valley Primary School, a sole-teacher, nine-pupil school. He did two years of high school by correspondence but he says he was not good at paying attention so correspondence did not work so well.

He then attended St Bede's College as a boarder where he had to 'pull his socks up'. As the end of school loomed, Bill was still unsure of his future ca-

reer. He considered the navy and civil engineering, but the problem was solved by a chance encounter with a Lands and Survey officer who asked the most fundamental question. - "What do you like?".

Bill really liked being outdoors in the wild, travelling, hunting, shooting and fishing. What was he good at? Well, he had a head for numbers. He was good at trigonometry. It was settled.

Bill began his working life in 1954 as a draughting cadet in the Blenheim office of the Lands and

Survey Department. As Bill tells it, he wasn't neat enough for draughting. Fortunately he was soon appointed survey cadet.

So began the long and illustrious career of one of New Zealand's greatest public servants who would eventually become Surveyor-General and Director-General of the Department of Survey and Land Information. Bill's work would help make fundamental changes to many aspects of New Zealand life that most of us take for granted such as planning a trip, exploring a national park, buying a house, and voting.

Surveying would take Bill deep into Aotearoa New Zealand's back country, south to Antarctica, north to Malaysia, and across the globe as a land administration expert working for NZAID, AUSAID, the World Bank, United Nations, FAO, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Pacific, South-East Asia, China, the Middle East and Africa. There he helped land administration projects and determined the locations of disputed international borders including the Iraq-Kuwait border after the first Gulf war. The work was challenging, physically, personally and sometimes politically.

Bill's early career was full of travel which he loved but moving from house to house – 13 of them – all became too difficult. Bill took a job as planning surveyor at Head Office in Wellington where he finally settled down with his wife, Judy, and their growing family – Mark, Paul, Peter and Hamish.

Bill adapted to his new life in Head Office and it soon became clear that, as well as being an excellent surveyor, he was also an exceptional leader. Colleagues describe him as judging his own success by how well he helped others to succeed. Bill, they say was always forward looking, and particularly interested in how new technology might change the department. What were the opportunities? What would staff need to learn? How could this help New Zealanders?

Bill (Ngai Tahu, Scottish and Irish) was also alert to social change; early on he recognised the significance of biculturalism in the public service. He actively encouraged the recognition of tikanga and promoted the importance of te reo Māori and was determined that the department would become a trusted source of information for Māori in the resolution of land claims.

As Surveyor-General and Director-General of the Department of Survey and Land Information from 1987 to 1996, Bill chaired the New Zealand Geographic Board and he was part of the effort to

ensure that place names reflected the full sweep of the country's history.

As Surveyor-General on the Electoral Boundaries Commission, he provided the first draft of new electoral boundaries each census, instituting procedures that strengthened New Zealand's enviable tradition of political neutrality in the drawing of electoral boundaries. Bill was appointed an honorary colonel by the New Zealand Army as its Director of Military Mapping and Geodesy. He represented New Zealand at the annual Five Nations military survey and mapping meetings for nine politically sensitive years.

Throughout his career, Bill has been a consistent supporter of the University of Otago and its National School of Surveying. He worked closely Professor Basil Jones to develop BSc degrees which he supported with computer finance and by moving technical staff to Dunedin so they could enrol as fulltime students. This upskilling produced a generation of men and women who formed the backbone digital mapping and spatial data base innovations subsequently undertaken by the Department of Survey and Land Information.

What was his most important achievement? There were many to choose from, but Bill well remembers the day he was told by Finance Minister Roger Douglas that the department could no longer be primarily funded by taxpayers. It would have to earn its way through charging for services and its budget would be cut by 50 per cent – which turned out to be 70 per cent!

There was a real chance the department would be broken apart, ending its proud record of innovation and scattering its bright young staff whom Bill had done so much to develop. However, under Bill's leadership, the department continued to meet its increasingly challenging cost-recovery levels. After 10 years, it had surpassed the end goal of 70 per cent by an additional 7 per cent.

Bill believes that challenges are opportunities. What matters is how you adapt. Colleagues describe him as always seeming to be one step ahead, always having a clear vision of the way forward. Under his leadership the department thrived and became a world leader among such organisations.

And that was possible because Bill is essentially an optimist who believes in people with whom he works and in the power of innovation. Above all, Bill Robertson is driven by a fundamental ethic of service to Aotearoa and its people. ●