



World authority on bees

ELIZABETH EXLEY

Entomologist

Born: Brisbane,
November 29, 1927

Died: Brisbane,
September 1, 2007

ELIZABETH Morris Exley was a woman of influence. As a pioneer of research into Australian bees, she was a role model for future women scientists.

She had an extensive career as an educator and researcher, predominantly spent at The University of Queensland, and was a world renowned expert in her field.

She was the first child of Arthur Eric John Exley and Elizabeth Francis Morris, well-known Bardon identities. Both her grandfathers were influential in the teaching profession in early Brisbane.

Her grandmother, also named Elizabeth Exley, founded St Luke's Nursing Service and advocated for women in Brisbane in the early 1900s.

With this family upbringing Dr Exley believed firmly in a woman's right to self-determination, a principle she maintained throughout her life.

Her primary and secondary schooling was at Rainworth State School and Brisbane Girls Grammar School.

In 1948 she graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree from The University of Queensland and went on to gain an honours degree, a Master of Science and, in 1968, was awarded a PhD for her work on Australian native bees.

Her initial research interest was ants but she switched allegiance to native bees after being inspired by Professor Charles Michener, a world authority on bees from the University of Kansas, who was visiting Queensland during preparation of his monograph

on bees of Australia and the South Pacific.

Realising how little was known of the native bee fauna of Australia, Dr Exley was encouraged by Prof Michener to study them, which then became her life's work.

Recounting memories of bee collecting trips, one of her former PhD students, Dr Judith King said: "Collecting trips were fun, they were also hard work — out in the sun collecting from blossoms all day, the nets were heavy and awkward, and swinging them often resulted in sore back and shoulders and bruised legs.

"The evenings were spent sorting and storing the day's catch. Very little was allowed to stand between Elizabeth and her bees."

The many thousands of bees of all families collected on these trips, and by her students, are stored in The University of Queensland insect collection and are a significant resource for bee researchers.

Dr Exley visited universities, museums, bee researchers and collections in many countries, including several at the hub of the bee research world including Prof Michener's laboratories and the Snow Entomological Museum in Kansas, the Natural History Museum in London and Hope Collections in Oxford.

In the 1980s, her research extended into insect pollination of crops such as lychee, macadamia, pigeon pea and custard apple. Some of this work was done in collaboration with the CSIRO.

As a teacher, she enjoyed lecturing and talking with students and made a significant contribution to the education of entomologists in Australia.

Although most of her research involved the euryglossinae family of bees, her postgraduate students stud-

ied many different groups including other bee families, wasps, butterflies, flies, beetles and spiders.

As a supervisor, she guided rather than directed.

Dr King says Dr Exley was generous with her time, always ready to listen and discuss, forthright with her opinions and meticulous in checking detail.

She took an active part in university administration, leading the Department of Entomology in 1982 and serving on boards of the Faculty of Science, Faculty of Agriculture and the Standing Committee of Convocation.

She was a life member of the Queensland Entomological Society, which she joined in 1948, and an honorary member of the Australian Entomological Society.

She had a passion for travelling and first ventured overseas in 1952 having won a fellowship to Imperial College, University of London, where she also participated in the University Games winning a gold medal in field events.

She had extended visits to universities and scientific institutions across the United States and travelled extensively throughout Europe, Asia and South America.

She said her only regret in life was never having seen the pyramids of Egypt.

In retirement, she often took members of her family on overseas trips and taught them that education and learning is a lifelong event and the key to opportunity and freedom.

Dr Exley was a woman of substance and a safety net to many people.

She is survived by her sister, Amerson Shepherdson, niece, Elizabeth McCray and family.

Jane Milburn



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