OBITUARY

Robert Aitken Barton
MBE, Dip Ag (Massey), M Inst Meat, FNZIAS

Bob Barton retired from Massey University in 1986 after a staggering 47 years of service; Bob Barton was, of himself, an ‘institution’ at Massey. Such was his passion, loyalty, hard work and dedication to the University, and to the wider agricultural community that it served. During his life Bob became a household name throughout the sheep and beef cattle sector of New Zealand. He was a role model for the University’s commitment to extension and technology transfer. His network of associates and friends across all aspects of the sheep and beef sector was vast. He conducted regular radio interviews, wrote ‘popular’ articles in the farming press, hosted a huge number of farmers and farming leaders at Massey, and in his home. Bob was equally at home with farmers in cattle and sheep yards or in debating the latest aspects of meat science and animal husbandry with leading international scientists from institutions such as Clay Centre in Nebraska, USA.

Bob Barton simply lived and breathed Massey. He was the driving force behind the Massey Alumni Association, the establishment of the Riddet Memorial Trust Art Collection, the Massey Agricultural Research Foundation, the hosting of the first-ever World Congress on Sheep and Beef Cattle Breeding, and the campaign to build a chapel in honour of Sir Geoffrey Peren, amongst many other institutional-enhancing initiatives. His network and respect throughout the farming community resulted in many student recruitments. He regularly provided encouragement for colleagues elsewhere to return ‘home’ to Massey. Bob was a mainstay of the annual Sheep Farmer’s Meetings at the Palmerston North Opera House where 800 to 1,000 people would attend. He edited the meeting’s Proceedings for two decades. His editorial skills were legendary. There was no better colleague to run a manuscript past than Bob. He had an incredible eye for detail and demanded high written standards; as many a ‘bruised’ author and committee secretary can attest!

The origin of his unbridled passion for Massey probably arose from his association with Sir Geoffrey Peren, the Founding Principal of Massey Agricultural College. It was Peren who appointed him as a Technician upon completion of his Diploma in Agriculture in 1940 as the top student, and later promoted him to Junior Lecturer in 1945. Bob revered Peren, as did many others.

A remarkable aspect of Bob’s career at Massey was that, despite the absence of a degree, he progressed through the lecturing grades to the level of Reader, or Associate Professor in today’s terms. Few others, if any, have achieved that feat anywhere. He did so because of the excellence of his academic work and its impact on actual farming practises. In the 1960s he instituted the first of nine trials to compare the growth rates and carcass composition of different cattle breeds, both beef and dairy. As a result of this work the merits of Friesian and Friesian-cross breeds soon became apparent; often being superior to traditional beef breeds. This work laid the foundation for the dairy-beef industry in the nation. The Agricultural Production Council appointed him as Chair of the Working Party on Dairy Beef and Veal to encourage dairy-beef production. Today, that sector is now worth $300 million annually. He worked closely with many breed societies, in several cases achieving an Honorary Life Membership thereof. He was instrumental in having the Combined Beef Breeders Research Committee of New Zealand established. He also worked with sheep on aspects of reproductive performance and the problem of excessive fatness. During his career he supervised some 22 Masterate candidates. Few other academics would have given more lectures, radio talks and written more articles for ‘lay’ audiences in the space of their careers, than Bob. Fittingly, he was elected to a Fellowship of the New Zealand Institute of Agricultural Science and an Honorary Life Membership of the New Zealand Society for Animal Production. Following retirement he was deservedly awarded an MBE for services to agriculture and education.

Bob Barton has made an outstanding contribution to animal production in New Zealand. To be a student and then work alongside him was indeed a privilege.

Robert Anderson and Stephen Morris