

JOHN LOUIS PERDRIX R.I.P.

1926 – 2005

Born in Adelaide on 30 June 1926, John was the third and last child of Alfred and Winifred Perdrix.

His childhood years were spent in Adelaide. Upon reaching school age, his parents' frequent moves dictated that his education take place at boarding school. The young student's alma mater was Xavier College, in the Melbourne suburb of Kew.

John was an above-average student – albeit of rather a rebellious nature, a quality that remained with him for the whole of his life. This character trait engendered great concern in both his fastidious father and the highly exacting Jesuit Fathers who taught him. In this connection, on more than one occasion, Perdrix Snr was summoned to appear at the Principal's office. Nevertheless, all survived these vicissitudes. The young student's talents in the sciences were soon apparent, coming to the fore during his senior years of secondary school.

John's early athletic ability was well demonstrated with wins in the under-11 and under-12 wheelbarrow races. In 1939, he took out first place in the Junior School hurdles. Unfortunately, an injury put an end to this promising career. Years later, he would become a self-appointed cricket scorer. The traditional protocol employed therein was duly amended in order to conform to his rigorous standards. The teenage years passed and John's marks improved sufficiently to gain him entry into Melbourne Technical College, where he advanced his chemistry skills. Not being one to stand back, he took an active role in the College's dramatic society, for which he organized many dances and other functions. He also developed a magic act. This budding capability would serve him well in the many social, and later family, situations in which he became involved.

Whilst busy with all these activities, John met a young lady named Elizabeth, who was to become his wife some years later. The two regularly attended all the big dances and balls around town, often winning prizes in recognition of their outstanding efforts.

Married on 4 July 1951 at Xavier College Chapel in Melbourne, the two settled into a small flat in Toorak. One year later, their first child, Louise, was born. Thereafter, the family moved to 43 William Street in Box Hill. This large, friendly, rambling house, which came to be well known to many an ASV member, was a gift from John's parents. John and Elizabeth, whom he had affectionately named "Biddy", quickly expanded their family. The first of two sons arrived fourteen months later. Ultimately, another four children would complete the family. The first son was given the same name as his father but, with the typically dry sense of humour of which he was possessed,

John Snr called the child “Bomber” from the day of his birth, this because John Jnr came into the world on the same day that the first British atomic test was conducted in the Australian Outback.

In the early days of the marriage, John found employment in a range of occupations, finally settling with a company named "Membranes", where he became the company research chemist. In the mid-sixties, he set out on his own, working from home to develop, produce and market a range of chemical products – mostly for application in the dairy industry.

In the early seventies, John accepted an offer to join CSIRO in Melbourne. Several years later, the operation was moved to Perth. Sadly, at that same time, it became increasingly evident that John and Elizabeth were experiencing difficulties in their marriage. The two decided to separate, with John leaving for the West and Elizabeth staying on in Melbourne. And so it was that in 1974, John moved to Perth with his daughter, Fleur (“Flossie”), who joined him to set up house in a small flat in Tuart Hill. Soon after, however, he moved into his long-time home at 46 Oceanic Drive, Floreat. This residence went on to be frequented by his many friends and colleagues, the majority of them also being astronomical aficionados. Here, a tasty stout was always on the brew and John, who declared himself an authoritative connoisseur of the fruit of the vine, generously plied his guests with a good red, enthusiastically proclaiming that regular consumption of this fluid was conducive to the promotion of good health.

Without astronomy, John would not be the man we all grew to know, respect and revere. From an early age, the subject of astronomy fascinated him. Wishing to become actively involved in the pursuit of the science, he joined the British Astronomical Association in 1953 and served as Secretary of the Victorian Branch from 1954 to 1963.

John became a member of the Astronomical Society of Victoria in 1954. After one year as Vice-President, he served two terms as President, 1960-1961 and 1967-1968. In 1960, he was appointed Director of the Computing Section, a position he held for fourteen years. As Editor of “The Journal of the Astronomical Society of Victoria”, his passion for the science found great expression. During his first term in this post, 1963 to 1966, the Society’s publication achieved prestigious status. This continued from 1970 to 1973.

John became Editor of the Society’s “Astronomical Yearbook”, which he conceived and compiled as Editor. The first issue was produced in 1964, and 2005 marks the 42nd year of continuous publication. Even after moving to Perth, John continued with formatting and printing the Yearbook without charge to the Society. Our Yearbook is highly regarded by such important authorities as the US Naval Observatory. As a Demonstrator at Melbourne Observatory, he assisted in training and examining new Demonstrators from 1968 to 1973. In recognition of his signal services to the Society in a variety of fields, John was elected an Honorary Life Member of the ASV in 1972.

He was a foundation member of the Museum Observatory Council (Victoria), officiating from 1959 to 1973. In addition, he was a Tutor in Astronomy in the Council of Adult Education (Victoria) from 1960 to 1973.

Always willing to share his knowledge and encourage neophyte astronomers, John became mentor and friend to many, including the present writer. He delivered many lectures to the Society and wrote numerous papers and articles for the Journal. He was an enthusiastic proponent for the institution of the popular and highly successful biennial National Australian Convention of Amateur Astronomers (NACAA). In 2006, NACAA XXII is to be held in Frankston, Victoria, hosted by the Mornington Peninsula Astronomical Society.

John's knowledge of and proficiency and expertise in the science of astronomy led to his election as a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society in 1959. He served as Executive Secretary of the International Union of Amateur Astronomers from 1993 to 1996, and as President from 1996 to 1999. Most importantly, John was appointed a Consultant Member of Commission 41 (History of Astronomy) of the International Astronomical Union (IAU) in 1995, and became a Full Member in 1997. Only in exceptional circumstances are such appointments extended to non-professional astronomers.

In Western Australia, John joined the Astronomical Society of Western Australia (ASWA) late in 1974. There, he occupied various Council positions from 1978 to 1996; he was elected President for the period 1992 to 1994. For this Society, he produced an annual "Ephemeris". To reward his exemplary service, the ASWA installed John as an Honorary Life Member in 1996.

With his sharp intellect, probing thirst for knowledge, and meticulous nature, John excelled in the field of the history of astronomy. He acquired such great expertise on the topic that in later years he would found, edit and publish the "Australian Journal of Astronomy". Its scope was later widened, this being reflected in the change of its title to the "Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage", for which he was Managing Editor up until last year. Both publications have become invaluable reference resources in the libraries of major universities, observatories and astronomical institutions around the globe. These organizations regard these items as outstanding authorities on the subject.

His passion for astronomy took John to most parts of the world and introduced him to similarly enthusiastic astronomers, many of whom became lifelong friends. Annual pilgrimages to conferences, both national and international, occupied a special place in his yearly activities.

As his editing and publishing workload expanded, John never gave up an opportunity to speak at a gathering of fellow astronomers. Through these presentations, his publications and his unswerving dedication, he became well known both domestically and internationally. Retiring at

age 65, he took the opportunity to travel widely, often attending astronomical conferences and always catching up with the many friends he had made over the course of many years.

His long-time wish to visit Moscow and St. Petersburg were placed in abeyance in 2004, when John was diagnosed with inoperable cancer of the liver. Aided by his determination and strength of spirit, he embarked upon a course of therapy designed to improve his quality of life. Accepting that there was no hope of staving off the death sentence, John found that the treatment produced outstanding results.

Deciding that he was well enough to withstand the rigours of the journey, John left for Russia in June 2005, in company with "Bomber". Unfortunately, his health declined rapidly during the trip, so much so that on the homeward flight he had to be taken from the aircraft in Dubai. There, he was transferred to the Rashid Hospital where, after three days, he died peacefully on 27 June 2005, four days short of his seventy-ninth birthday.

John Jnr was faced with overcoming many difficulties in this Middle East locale. Eventually, his father was cremated and, as a result of 'arrangements' concluded with local External Affairs and Customs officials, John's remains were brought back to Australia in an aluminium lunch box. He would have been delighted to know that this container carried a notice, in both Latin and Arabic script, to the effect that the metal was 99.7% pure! The funeral took place in Perth in July. A Memorial Service was conducted at St Simon's Catholic Church, Clayton, on 20 August. Many people from the astronomical community around Australia, together with a large contingent of ASV members, including six Past Presidents, joined the family in celebrating our esteemed member's life. John has been laid to his final earthly rest at the Springvale Necropolis beside both his parents.

The ASV is working on plans that will ensure John's memory will be honoured on an ongoing basis.

- Jim Trainor