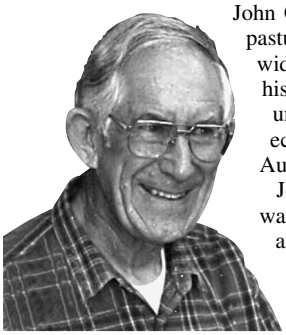
Obituary

JOHN COMPTON TOTHILL (1931–2008)



John Compton Tothill was a pasture scientist who was widely recognised for his contributions to the understanding of pasture ecology in both tropical Australia and Africa.

John, a New Zealander, was born in 1931, and was a graduate of Lincoln College, Canterbury University. For a brief period after graduating, he was employed as Instructor in Agriculture at Alexandra, New Zealand, before moving to the USA, where he graduated with a Ph D at the Davis Campus, University of California, for agro-ecological research on the rangelands of the central coast range of California.

Having completed his Ph D, John took up employment with CSIRO on October 9, 1961 and commenced duty in Brisbane on January 31, 1962 with the Division of Tropical Pastures. His starting salary was the princely sum of £A 1891 per annum (a considerable amount in those days) and he was provided with first class sea fares from the USA. His early work with CSIRO was focussed on studying the autecology of black speargrass, *Heteropogon contortus*, and, in studies at Lawes, near Brisbane, he showed how burning promoted the dominance of this species. Work on black speargrass was extended to cover phenological and chromosomal variation on a collection assembled from the entire New World and Old World range of its distribution. From 1964 to 1972, John studied the effects of burning, grazing and fertilising on pasture composition at Gigoomgan, south-east Queensland, and showed marked differences in response of the native grass species present.

A major experiment started by John at Narayen, near Mundubbera, in 1971, continued until 1986. This landmark experiment, which was supported by a considerable team of technical, field and other staff, examined development options in silver-leaf ironbark woodland, including: killing trees (with or without oversowing of the legume siratro), and fully replacing native pasture with a buffel grass-siratro pasture; these options were compared with a native pasture control, at a range of stocking rates. A vast amount of data was assembled from this forward-looking trial, not just on pasture and animal production, but also on the biodiversity and spatial and temporal dynamics of native herbaceous species. The first major papers from this study were published in the September 2008 issue of *Tropical Grasslands* (pages 129–169), with two more expected to follow in 2009. If it were not for John's long and debilitating illness, these papers would surely have been in print years ago.

John was author or co-author of more than 80 publications in the fields of pasture agronomy and ecology. These included papers in national and international journals, and chapters in many books relating to his area of expertise, as well as presentations at a wide range of conferences and symposia. His research supported the concept that tropical native pastures do not need to be totally replaced and emphasised the importance of legume introduction, tree removal and appropriate management for sustaining pasture production. He is widely known for his senior authorship of *The Grasses of Southeast Queensland* (1963), subsequently extended to cover all of southern Queensland and still available through The Tropical Grassland Society of Australia Inc. He also reviewed the condition, productivity and sustainability of north Australian pasture lands with Col Gillies, producing a landmark report, which was published in 1992.

He was chairman of the organising committee for the International Savanna Symposium in 1984 and in 1989 was invited to be one of five Plenary Speakers at the XIV International Grassland Congress in Nice. He was also the foundation editor for the journal *Tropical Grasslands.*

John was invited to take up the position as Head of the Forage Research Group at the International Livestock Centre for Africa (ILCA) in 1985, continuing with ILCA until 1989. There he provided intellectual leadership, reorganising the agronomic research to a collaborative Africa-wide basis and spearheaded the development of networking to link ILCA's research to national African research systems. John was respected at ILCA for his 'remarkable ability to work in a multi-disciplinary and multicultural team', and in 1986 he was promoted to Deputy Director Research for Forage Agronomy.

Technical and field staff, scientists and all who worked with John Tothill, without exception, respected his calmness and wisdom. With his interest in Queensland's native flora, John was 20 years ahead of his time, especially in relation to current concerns over climate change.

John lost his battle with illness around midnight, September 26/27, 2008. He will be sorely missed by his many friends and colleagues. He was a true gentleman, in every sense of the word, and an inspiration to many of us.

Bryan Hacker