

## PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS TO THE 20TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE TROPICAL GRASSLAND SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA—1982

### THE TROPICAL GRASSLAND SOCIETY AND THE MODERN WORLD

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It seems only natural that the retiring president of a society such as this, which attempts to bring together all those with an interest in pastures and the products therefrom, should look to the future and to attempt to offer some snippets of advice to those who must follow him.

As Ian Hart (Hart 1973) pointed out in his presidential address this society is unique in that it attempts to bring together people from a wide range of backgrounds and current interests. *In particular it attempts to bring together the primary producer and the scientist on that common ground of productive pastures.*

That there will be problems in doing this goes without saying. The Tropical Grassland Society, in its wisdom has attempted to minimize these problems by purposely seeking to rotate the presidency between scientist and primary producer and even organizations within the scientific area and enterprises within the field of primary production.

In my own case I am probably the first hobby farmer to become president and I am well aware of the problems the society experiences in maintaining the interests of all members. About 20 years ago I became a member of the Tropical Grassland Society of Australia. As a dentist and a member of a profession where detail and the sensitive touch was part of my daily routine, driving a tractor or using bar and shovel was welcome relief during the weekends. And so the prospect of creating something of use, even of beauty and certainly with the likelihood of financial return, coaxing a new and special variety of grass from a singularly unresponsive and uncharitable soil type became doubly attractive.

So I read and I observed and I tried and I experimented. Sometimes success was achieved, but often failure and disappointment was my lot. Then about 18 years ago I gave up being a member of the Tropical Grassland Society of Australia, because even with an elementary scientific training I found I could not interpret what was written in the very handsome journal published regularly.

And so the years went by until about five years ago I attended a splendid field day at Inverary, with the encouragement and invitation of my friend Ron Pechey. This was my undoing, for my appetite was whetted to learn more of what exciting steps had been achieved in recent years with new species of pastures. With the persuasiveness of the born diplomat the good Pechey in due course caused me to accept nomination as Vice President of this august group. This then led to the Presidency of our Society. A step I in no way regret.

At my inauguration, however I felt like the meat in the sandwich because I stood between the academic and the straight primary producer.

I hoped that I might help forge another link in the line of communication between these two groups, a link that is to the mutual benefit of both groups. This does not mean that the extension officers have not achieved this very well but there is always scope for more and equally effective lines of communication between any two groups of people to improve the total mutual understanding. I, as a hobby farmer, a professional from another area of science, with farming interests as well, could have been well placed to achieve this objective.

And so as the first days of my office began to teach me what a task I had assumed, I came more and more to enjoy the support and friendship of my Committee and indeed I have benefited enormously from this happy year.

But I began to feel that perhaps our Society should consider a slight change in direction. For many years its achievements were proven with a great variety of new grasses. It had shown the way to bring higher productivity to vast areas of land particularly in the central Queensland region. Siratro and para and the buffels were all new names of pasture grasses, not widely recognized at that time in Australia when the Society had its beginnings.

Field days spent in dust and flies, often peering at two tiny leaves struggling through an uncharitable soil type were hailed with glowing rhetoric and gleeful exclamations from a group of ecstatic scientists whilst I and others of more cynical mien stood by and wondered aloud how anyone could feed a mob of bullocks on such tucker!!

But came the rains and yet another success story was notched up to the Tropical Grassland Society.

And so, as I said, I thought *a slight shift in direction would bring a whole new vision to our Society, one that would bring it into assessing modern technology suddenly thrust upon us, and one which would perhaps tie in the achievements of the past with its expanding success in the future.*

Having chosen the arid and semi-arid zone as the areas of this year's field activity we have had two wonderfully interesting field trips; one to the Charleville area in April and one to the Rockhampton area in July. But this shift in direction kept bothering me until one day driving to Brisbane for one of our executive meetings I was thinking about projecting our energies into the future and I thought—Computers!

Being a Science Fiction fan, a great admirer of Dr. Who and an avid watcher of *Towards 2000*, I have developed over the last few years a great respect for the computer, and yet I temper this admiration with a touch of anxiety and conservative wariness.

This led to the theme for this Annual General Meeting being on computers and the many interesting things they can achieve. We can store in their memories a million snippets of information, we can shop by them, we can buy and sell by them without moving from our office chair. We can bank with them and with the satellite up there, the computer has given the telephone and television set to friends of mine on the Diamantina and the Mulligan who only a few short years ago were lucky to receive a radio signal.

*Yet with all this technology we must take care that by the year 2000 it will not have given us so much less a work load and so increased our leisure time that it could cause the decline and fall of our modern civilization.* Too much leisure was one of the forces in the decline and fall of earlier great civilizations. It could be that because man has taught his computer to remember and subsequently think, with pure clear logic, the two great powers could well find that the massive computer banks of their Defence departments in conjunction with the computer banks of the C.I.A. and the K.G.B. could collaborate at some time and decide that, because man is so illogical in his behaviour, he is no longer necessary—and then—Zap!

But we have not yet reached this stage, and today has seen such interesting speakers bringing to us an easily understood programme of the basics of computer technology, all the better to give us an understanding how best they can work for us.

*The computer is an integral part of the modern world. A further tool to help bridge the gap between scientist and primary producer. A further means of dissemination of information which societies such as Tropical Grassland could well use to advantage to hold the interests of all members and to advance their respective understandings of each others problems.*

Just how this is done I must leave to others more wise than I but I leave with you the thought that this possibility should be explored further at future meetings and by future Executive Committees.

#### REFERENCE

HART, I. B. (1973)—Co-operation between primary producers and Scientists—*Tropical Grasslands* 7: 173-174