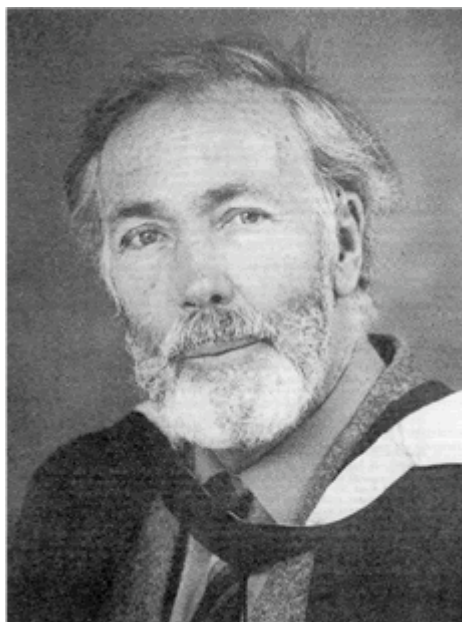


CENTREFOLD

Professor Desmond Sawyer



The retirement of Desmond Sawyer at the end of this year marks a watershed for the Otago University Mathematics Department. As department head for twenty three of the last twenty eight years (broken by a five year spell at Waikato in the sixties) Desmond has had a major influence on the present day shape of the department; through times of uncertainty, rapid growth and latterly, retrenchment, his firm leadership has been the main stabilizing factor.

Desmond Sawyer was born in Sheffield in 1924 and educated at Manchester Grammar School and then St John's College, Cambridge. As with others of his generation, university studies were interrupted by the war; after two terms in 1943 he spent three years in the army serving with the Royal Artillery and then as a survey officer with the Royal Indian Artillery. He returned to Cambridge for two years after the war, gaining a Distinction in Part III of the Mathematical Tripos and the Adams Prize. Later in 1948, newly married, he accepted a lectureship in mathematics at Otago University (under Professor R.M. Gabriel).

There were only four members of staff at that time; teaching loads were both diverse and heavy while opportunities for research were limited. After 3½ years in this first appointment Desmond left New Zealand and took a position at the University College of the Gold Coast with Professor Hugh Blaney who had similar mathematical interests in convexity and the geometry of numbers. As far as research was concerned the next two years in Africa proved to be a productive period, though the Sawyers were pleased to return again to Dunedin in 1954. Here promotion to a readership came quickly, at the beginning of 1957, but almost simultaneously events took another turn and Desmond found himself acting head of department following the death of Professor Gabriel. Within a few months, at the age of thirty three, he was appointed to the chair.

During the next seven years at Otago his interest and involvement in administrative matters grew steadily. For a time he was chairman of the Otago branch of the A.U.T. He served on the Academic Board of the University of New Zealand until its dissolution in 1961 and also on its Entrance Board; subsequently he was a member of the new Universities Entrance Board for several years. He served also on the boards of local high schools and his three year term as Dean of the Faculty of Science coincided with the phasing in of reforms in the degree structure including the new Honours degree.

At the beginning of 1963 Desmond was appointed by the University Grants Committee to the Academic Advisory Committee for the University of Waikato and became intrigued by its possibilities. This led the following year to an invitation to become Professor of Mathematics and Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the new university, where he remained for five years. Over this period he became deeply involved with many aspects of university development, in particular, playing an active role in the formation of the School of Education and acting as its Dean during the initial stages.

Desmond returned to Otago University in January 1970, now as Professor of Pure Mathematics and Chairman of the Department. The rapid growth in student numbers and influx of new staff in the early seventies led to a rebuilding of the department and the consequent growing pains placed a heavy burden on the chairman's shoulders. Nevertheless, he continued to participate fully in all aspects of the mathematical life of the department, carrying the same teaching load as other members of staff throughout and playing an active role in the various series of staff seminars which have occurred over the years. Among his colleagues he is respected most for his keen geometric insight, which none can challenge, and for a certain flair for concise expression of difficult matters, which penetrates to the heart of a problem. He has plainly set himself very high standards in every aspect of his work and earned the respect of his staff by his own example. At the end of this year Desmond and his wife Pam will move to Wanaka where they have had a holiday home for several years. All his friends and colleagues will join with me in wishing them a long and happy retirement.

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