

VALE DR DR GRETNA WESTE AM (1917–2006)



Gretna Margaret Weste was born on 5 September 1917 in Dumfries, Scotland. Her parents were Australian but her father, a chemist, was working as a chemist in a munitions factory. Dumfries is about 30 km from Gretna Green, hence her given name. At age two she came to Australia living in Surrey Hills. The family went on frequent camping holidays where she developed her lifetime passion to be a botanist. At the age of five she made her first visit to Wilsons Promontory which was to become another lifetime passion.

After matriculating from high school, with an emphasis on English and French, Gretna went to Melbourne University to do a science degree. She graduated B.Sc. (Hon.) in 1938 with first class honours, exhibitions and a Howitt natural history scholarship. As a measure of her intelligence it is interesting that Gretna considered Professor Leeper the best lecturer she ever had. Gretna then joined the Forests Commission of Victoria as a plant pathologist; however on starting she found she was being paid as a temporary typist the only rate available for a woman. An appeal to the Public Service Board was of no avail and she continued to be employed as a temporary typist. While there she completed a M.Sc. in 1939 at Melbourne University. Her work, at CSIRO Forest Products, focussed on formation of compression wood and other growth stresses in living hardwood trees. She then stopped work in 1942 to raise a family, a son and two daughters.

Gretna's husband was ill for a long period of time causing financial hardship. From 1955 to 1960 Gretna was biology teacher at Firbank Church of England Girls' Grammar School in Melbourne. She was an inspirational but demanding teacher.

In 1960 she returned to Melbourne University as Co-ordinator in Botany. In the Department of Botany she enrolled to do a Ph.D. part time under the supervision of Dr L.D. Thrower. The Ph.D. was conferred in 1968 for her thesis titled *A study of the biology of Ophiobolus graminis*. Gretna was very proud that Professor S.D. Garrett was one of the examiners. The thesis was innovative in several ways. Gretna

was the first person to demonstrate infection of wheat roots by single ascospores of what is now *Gaeumanomyces graminis* (Sacc.) Arx & D.L. (Magnapothaceae), an important pathogen of cereals in Australia and most parts of the world. She also demonstrated presence of different varieties of the pathogen specific to particular cereal host genera. She was made senior lecturer in 1974 and Reader in 1980. After retiring in 1982, Gretna continued on as Senior Associate in the School of Botany. In 1983 she was awarded a D.Sc. by publications by Melbourne University.

After completing her Ph.D., Gretna became involved in studies of *Phytophthora cinnamomi* Rands and of the effects of the pathogen on communities of native plants in Victoria. She assisted Gordon Beaton, an enthusiastic amateur mycologist, in his studies of discomycete fungi resulting in description of a number of new taxa. The studies of *Phytophthora* became an interest for the rest of her life. During these studies she supervised numerous post graduate students and collaborated with other researchers in the Forests Commission of Victoria, and at Deakin and La Trobe Universities. She was a strong and effective leader and an inspirational teacher and would often host dinners in her home inviting researchers and their students in an attempt to build relationships and enhance the research effort.

The Fourth International Congress of Plant Pathology was held in Melbourne in 1983; Gretna was Chairman of the Organising Committee. Gretna was made a member of the Order of Australia in 1989, an honorary member of the Australasian Plant Pathology Society in 1992, and made Patron of the Australasian Mycological Society in 1999, a position she held until her death.

Gretna was a determined bushwalker for all her life. She had two hip replacements and at 82 broke an ankle while bushwalking. The doctor treating her said she would not walk again but he seriously underestimated Gretna's determination and resolve. At 83 she walked to the Inca Trail, climbed Dead Woman's Pass at 4,200 metres and reached Machu Picchu in Peru. Earlier she had climbed Mt Kilimanjaro in Kenya.

Gretna passed away at Kingston Beach near Hobart on 30 August 2006 aged 88. She is survived by her three children, six grandchildren, one great grandchild and a host of researchers and friends whose careers were in some way shaped by her contagious enthusiasm for the Australian bush, for rigorous science, and for botany. Gretna's was a life that should be an inspiration to all of us.

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