

Selwyn Lawrence Everist, B.Sc.

The name of Selwyn Everist is known far and wide throughout rural Queensland, where he has become a legend in his lifetime.

Everist was born at Tewantin, Queensland, on 22nd April, 1913. He gained his B.Sc. degree in the University of Queensland as an evening student, while working as a clerk in the Queensland Herbarium. On graduation in 1937, he was appointed research officer to the Blackall centre of the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Stock. His six years of research at Blackall, and his short period at Charleville as meteorological officer in the Royal Australian Air Force during World War II, were periods of intense activity. He travelled widely, becoming acutely aware of the problems of the grazing industry of western Queensland. His wide and deep experience of the country and its problems, his research observations supplemented by his innate ability to sense the long-term results of a proposed grazing strategy, placed Everist well ahead of his time. Most of his predictions have been largely substantiated by more recent detailed experimental work and have formed the basis of more sophisticated studies today.

In particular, he became concerned with the long-term effects of grazing on the mulga and Mitchell grass communities of western Queensland. In this area the erratic climate is the key factor in determining grazing strategies. Everist, as a botanist and climatologist, combined with Dr George Moule, a veterinarian, in an attempt to predict the frequency of drought and moderate its effect on the pastoral industry (both plant and animal).

Investigation of the effects of invasion of weeds (both herbaceous and woody) on to disturbed land, and methods for their control, naturally followed from Everist's arid-zone grazing studies. As a consequence of this research, Everist became closely involved with the problem of root-suckering which occurs when brigalow forests are cleared: satisfactory strategies for clearing brigalow forest were thus available before the Fitzroy Basin (Brigalow) Land Development Scheme was initiated. His papers and handbooks on this field are prized by agricultural scientist, farmer and grazier alike.

Weeds certainly reduce the productivity of grazing lands, but, like drought, they have gradual and cumulative effects on the grazier, slowly reducing his stock and finances. On the other hand, the death overnight of a prize herd due to poisonous plants is far more dramatic. Unfortunately, many plants in western Queensland, during some stage of their growth, are poisonous to stock. Everist attacked this problem vigorously as he did the problems of drought, weeds and rangeland conservation. Working in close association with veterinarians, he studied such problems as Birdsville Disease in horses and Georgina Poisoning of cattle and sheep. After many years of detailed research, he climaxed his studies by the publication of a 725 page book on Poisonous Plants of Australia. This book has received wide acclaim from botanists and veterinarians in Australia and overseas.

In 1954 Everist was appointed Queensland Government Botanist, a position he held until his retirement in 1976. His work for the grazing industry of the State continued unabated and expanded through the development of an Ecological Section within the Botany Branch of the Queensland Department of Primary Industries.

As Government Botanist he converted the Queensland Herbarium from a group of individual scientists working under inadequate conditions into a well organised institution with modern facilities. He fostered taxonomic research into the Queensland flora, in particular by creating the journal Contributions of the Queensland Herbarium, initiating a handbook on the flora of south-east Queensland and pioneering a computerised data-bank for the storage and rapid retrieval of botanical data.

Everist's professional association with the University of Queensland extends over some twenty-two years during which he regularly lectured to senior students in the Faculty of Veterinary Science and gave occasional lectures and seminars to students in the Department of Botany. In his capacity as Government Botanist and because of the nature of his own research interests within applied Botany, he had a close association with postgraduate students and staff and was frequently consulted on research programs, especially in the Departments of Botany and Veterinary Pathology and Public Health.

Everist was indefatigable: he developed applied botanical research on several fronts simultaneously and excelled in all. His depth of knowledge and understanding, his ability to work in interdisciplinary fields with scientists of diverse interests have proved his strength. He greatly influenced his colleagues through his ability to focus on the critical issues of any scientific problem, and this led to a demand for his contribution on such bodies as the Flora of Australia Committee, the Australian Weeds Committee, the Organising Committees for Australian Arid Zone Research Conferences, and the Queensland International Biological Program Conservation Committee. He served as a member of international panels on Useful Wildland Shrubs, Arid Grasslands and Underexploited Tropical Plants.

In his retirement the value of Everist's work continues to be recognised. In June 1977 he was Australian co-ordinator of a five-man delegation to the First United States-Australia Symposium on Poisonous Plants. It is fitting that the University should honour him by the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy honoris causa.