



Donald Sydney Biddle, AM, BA, M.Ed, PhD, FRGS, FACE

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Interview with Dr Don Biddle 4 February 2017

1940s – before and during World War II

Don enjoyed studying geography at school, and as a result obtained Second Class Honours in the Leaving Certificate at Parramatta High School. In 1940 and 1941, Don trained as a primary school teacher at Sydney Teachers' College. He taught for two years in small schools before serving with the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF).

Don, called *Snowy* because of his blonde hair, had been part of the 76th RAAF Squadron. At one time, his job was to train twenty army men to land with the RAAF and guard Kitty Hawk fighter aircrafts at night, to avoid destruction from Japanese bombardments. During his military service, Don was sent to Labuan Island in Borneo for three weeks. Once the allied forces had secured Labuan Island from the Japanese, the airfield was repaired and expanded for RAAF units.

1945 – returning home

After World War II, Don arrived in Sydney on 30 June 1945. He was required to immediately report to the Director-General of the New South Wales Department of Education. Don discovered he had been appointed to Collingullie Public School to commence teaching in July. The service had assigned him three months leave while the Department of Education had only granted him three weeks leave. Extremely annoyed with the Department of Education's inconsiderate orders, Don travelled to Wagga Wagga by train and then to Collingullie via a truck that carried farmers' deliveries and mail.

Collingullie – one teacher school

When Don arrived at Collingullie, he was dressed in khaki clothes and held a small kit bag. His mental state was fragile, he was extremely thin, his skin and eyes were yellow from malaria, but he was physically fit.

The welcoming committee at Collingullie consisted of the President of the school committee and the Secretary of the school (Mrs Cameron), who alleged he resembled a Japanese prisoner of war rather than a teacher. The

Secretary did not speak to Don and stated loudly *this is not good enough, I will ring the Director-General of Education immediately and have him replaced*. Despite the Secretary's objections, Don began teaching the following Monday, with the assistance of the President of the school committee. In response to the Secretary's complaints concerning Don, Mr Hosking the school inspector, visited him two to three times a week, for about six months. The inspector continually inquired about his health and always asked the same question – *got any diseases?*

While at Collingullie, Don taught all primary school subjects. Each morning from 9am to 11am, Don filled four to five blackboards with work for the children to complete during the day. The work was divided into sections, aimed to cater for diverse ages and abilities. Sometimes, Mrs Bennet would pop into the class to organise the day's work. Eventually, Don courteously articulated to her *Pardon me – I am the teacher here now. Thank you but I can take over*.

The **President** asked Don to speak to the School Teachers' Committee on resources he required to enable him to teach their children more effectively. During the meeting, the **Secretary** announced loudly that it was a *lot of rubbish* as previous teachers had not requested them. Don said *I looked at her for a while and said – Mrs Cameron if I can tell you how to manage your sheep and wheat farm then you can tell me how to teach*. In response, she slammed her books down and stormed out of the room. The **President** politely requested Don to continue with his presentation. At the completion of the meeting, Don received positive responses with questions and thanks.

Don, who has always been exceptionally polite, apologised to the **Secretary's** husband who was attending the meeting. In reply, he said *you are the first man to tell my wife off when she knows nothing about a topic. Thank you it will be good for her. Let's go for a beer*. They became good friends.

With minimal warning, the Director-General of Education appeared at the school. Over lunch, the Director-General drank a few beers. He then returned to the classroom and recited the

poem, *The Man from the Snowy River* by Banjo Paterson. Obviously feeling the effects of the beers, the Director-General unexpectedly placed his hands on his forehead and went to sleep. Don alarmed by this act and confused about what to do, gently placed his knee beside him to wake him up. Once woken the Director-General finished reciting the poem, as if nothing had transpired.

In 1945, Collingullie held its annual gymkhana and sports event. A local woman, who had won the 100 yards race for the past five years, pocketed the winner's money with no appreciation and acknowledgement. The community was stunned when Eileen, Don's wife, won the race and donated her winnings to the school to subsidise school resources. The community was unaware that Eileen was an exceptional runner and had been a member of the Athletics Women's Association in Sydney.

Inspector and university

In 1946, Don's wages increased and it became common practice to procure insurance. One morning there was a knock on the classroom door, when Don was industriously preparing the day's work. Don, irritated by the interruption, answered the knock and uttered to himself, *not another bloody insurance agent*. Instead, the gentleman announced *I am your new inspector*. The inspector sat at the back of Don's class for a month and observed his lessons. He eventually declared to Don *you are wasting your time here* and transferred him to Sydney to complete a university degree. The government at the time was offering university scholarships to ex-servicemen.

Don acknowledged that the inspector had an immense influence on his future education. The inspector suggested *you do not go for a pass but an honours degree . . . pick the subjects you like best*. Over the four years, Don studied diverse subjects including mathematics, science, history and geography. In 1950, Don graduated with first class honours in geography at the University of Sydney

While at university, Don rented a place at Liverpool and worked during the holidays to earn extra money.

Griffith High School

After completing his university degree, Don was appointed to Griffith High School for four years. He taught all subjects.

From the 1930s, an influx of Italian migrants from Calabria settled in Griffith. Most became fruit and vegetable farmers but in the 1950s, when Don was teaching at the high school, some

were supplementing their income by growing marijuana. As the demand for drugs soared, the small farms turned into large-scale plantations and the mafia escalated in power.

Gossip thrived in the country community when a policeman arrived at the school and escorted Don from the premises. Don became a *mafia suspect* and murmurs flourished such as *it is a drug bust!* Instead, the big burly policeman accompanied Don to the hospital where his wife had just delivered a baby.

During one geography lesson on tropical rainforests a young boy said *my Dad said you never talk about the latrine plant*. Don replied *it was not a plant but a hole in the ground for a toilet in the jungle*.

Don coached athletics at the school. In the group was an outstanding Aboriginal girl runner who would deliberately slacken her speed until all runners had overtaken her. Don using psychology offered her a chocolate if she won the next race. From then on, the young girl would win every competition she participated in and receive a chocolate from Don.

By this time, Don had acquired exceptional teaching skills. He had developed effective lesson plans and teaching programs, aimed to advance students' interests and outcomes.

North Sydney Boys' High School

Don was appointed Geography Master at the selective North Sydney Boys' High School. He originally experienced a few discipline problems as these bright young students assumed he was a student teacher, and misbehaviour was one of their crucial strategies. Don resolved the discipline problem by commencing the lesson at 3.30pm after school. As his bus did not arrive until 5pm he was unperturbed. After a week, discipline triumphed! Don had succeeded.

At the school, students who failed Latin in First Year (now Year 7) were forced to study geography in Second Year (now Year 8). Consequently, students had established a negative attitude towards the subject. Eventually, Don's inspiring teaching changed their views and motivated future geographers in the classroom. His mantra to students was *Geography is a living subject and not a dead subject like Latin*.

North Sydney Boys' High School was a Demonstration School for Sydney Teachers' College students and overseas teachers. An Indonesian teacher stated *your students respond so well to your lessons – not like in Indonesia.* Interestingly, Don had a few tricks up his sleeve – *put your left hand up if you do not know the*

answer, and the right hand up if you know the answer.

Don skilfully ensured effective classroom responses to his lessons by engaging students to research the topic before the demonstration lesson. On one occasion five students, who were delivering a lesson on Java to Indonesian teachers, visited the Mitchell Library to research questions and answers on the topic. Remember there was no Internet or Google in those days!

Don's superb lessons, impressed the inspector who promoted him as Head of Department to Glen Innes High School.

Sydney Teachers' College

Academic success continued and in 1958 Don was seconded to Sydney Teachers' College as a Lecturer in Geography. He was swiftly promoted to senior lecturer in 1963, and then appointed as Head of Department in 1966. From 1969 until his

promotion to Vice-Principal of Sydney Teachers' College in 1976, Don was Assistant Principal, Deputy Principal, and in 1975 and 1976, Head of the Division of Post-Graduate Diplomas and Degrees.

From 1971 to 1972 at the age of 46 years, Don received a scholarship to complete a PhD at the University of London. Over the years, Don received numerous academic and Australian awards and his contribution to geography, and his involvement with geographical education is prolific.

As a young student, Don lectured to me in geography at the University of Sydney. During this period, I learnt to love geography and admire Don's professionalism, expertise and understanding.

At present Don and his wife Eileen, live at Collaroy Plateau overlooking the picturesque ocean landscape – a geographer's dream.