AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCE

TRIBUTE

Frank Fenner

21 December 1914 – 22 November 2010

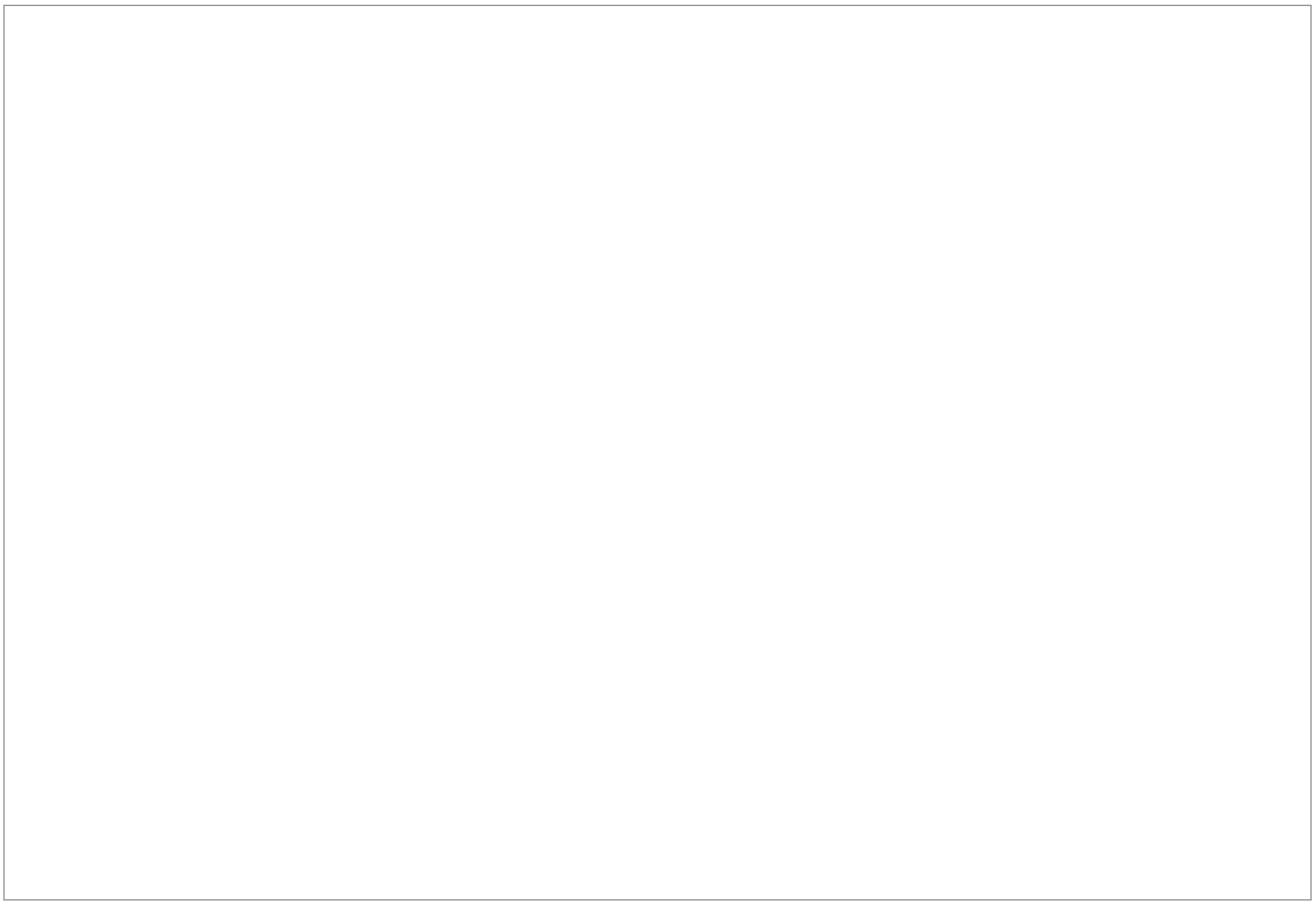

Photo: Robin Warren

Passionate inquiry – the legacy of a science super hero

The sudden death of science super hero, Professor Frank Fenner, a few weeks short of his 96th birthday caught colleagues and frthe science community. They include his:

- pioneering investigations into mousepox and other pox viruses
- work on myxomatosis to control the rabbit plagues of the 50s and 60s
- election to the Australian Academy of Science by founding Fellows in 1954
- contribution to the Academy for over 50 years as Council member, Secretary for Biological Sciences, and in positions on a range of committees
- early recognition of the environmental threats that human activity posed
- long list of publications including over 300 scientific journal articles and 22 books
- numerous and distinguished awards.

Passionately inquisitive to the end, Frank was a visiting fellow at the Australian National University until, at age 92, he decided to slow down a little, give up his office on campus and become, 'a visiting, visiting fellow'. He had devoted more than 70 years to science. In an interview with the Canberra Times he said, 'One's got to make

these decisions sometime. I find walking around difficult now … I've fallen over a

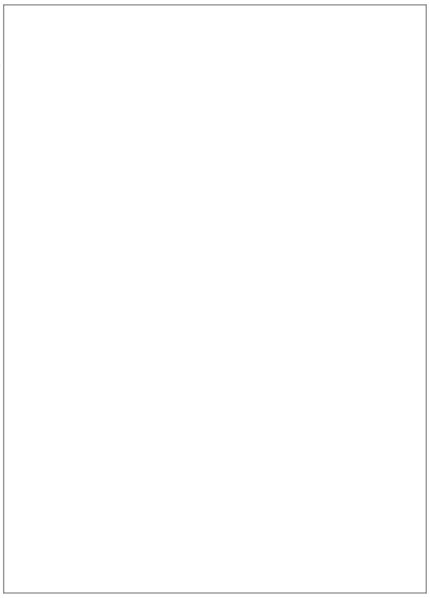

Photo: The Royal Society

Frank Fenner, 1961

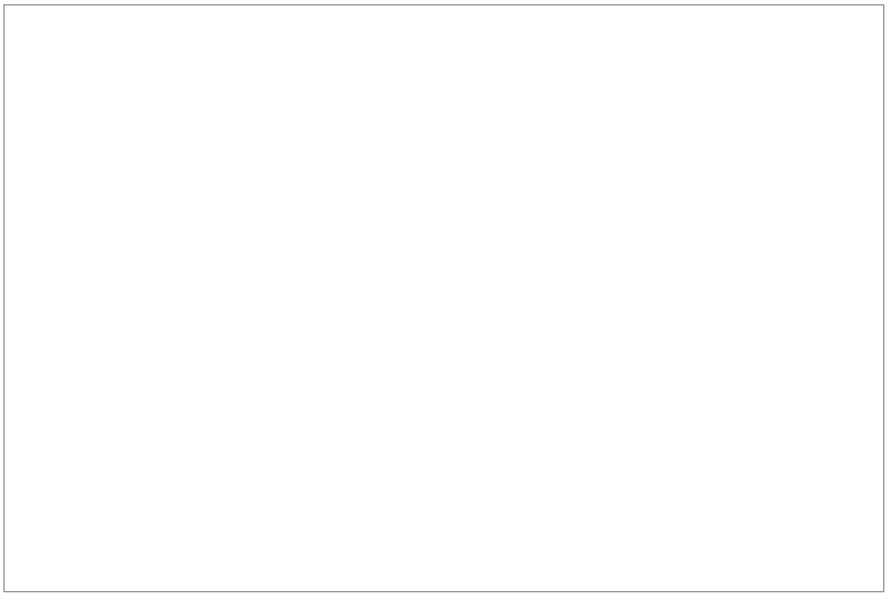

Photo: AAP/Alan Porritt

Frank Fenner posing next to a portrait of himself at the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra

and James Watson who discovered the structure of DNA.

But it was the University of Melbourne's David Syme Research Prize, which he received in 1949, that he cherished most. It was a direct link with his father, Charles Albert Edward Fenner, who had won the same award 20 years earlier and to whom Frank attributed his early interest in science.

Charles Fenner, an educator, talented science communicator and distinguished scientist in his own right, cultivated and fed young Frank's early hunger for knowledge. In his autobiographical work, Nature, Nuture and Chance: the lives of Frank and Charles Fenner, Frank celebrates and remembers with warmth this defining relationship.

'… we had occasional wonderful motoring holidays. The one I remember best was during the summer holidays in 1930… This was a trip from Adelaide through the Coorong and around much of country Victoria, where our uncles, aunts and cousins lived. On this trip, and whenever we went into the country… Father would explain features of the countryside to us, geological, botanical, historical, in a fascinating way.'

'… I was attracted to geology from a very early age; my parents kept a drawing I had made of the section of a volcano at the age of four years. While I was still at secondary school, I accumulated quite a good collection of fossils during our trips around Victoria and South Australia and by exchange, including a Triassic fossil of Ginkgo leaves (I now have the best Ginkgo tree in Canberra in my garden). I am sure that this childhood experience played a large part in my later interest in environmental problems.'

AWARDS

Among Frank's impressive list of awards are several government awards: MBE, military (1945), Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George, CMG (1976), Companion of the Order of Australia, AC (1989) and a Centenary Medal (2003). Other prizes include the David Syme Research Prize, University of Melbourne (1949), Fellowship of the Australian Academy of Science (1954) and of the Royal Society (1958), Flinders Medal, Australian Academy of Science (1967), ANZAC Peace Prize (1980), ANZAAS Medal (1980), Burnet Lecture, Australian Academy of Science (1985), Japan Prize and WHO Medal (1988), Copley Medal, Royal Society (1995), Senior Australian Achiever of the Year (1999), Albert Einstein World Award for Science (2000) and Clunies Ross Lifetime Contribution Award (2002).

After enrolling in science at the University of Adelaide, Frank chose to do medicine rather than his first love geology.

'My father advised me to go into medicine,' he told *Lumen*, the University of Adelaide's magazine in 2006. 'He said it would open up so many opportunities for me – physician, pathologist, surgeon, anaesthetist, psychiatrist, even research worker. The possibilities were endless.'

Shortly after he graduated in 1938, WWII intervened. Believing that the war would be fought in the tropics, Frank, with characteristic insight, went to Sydney to do a diploma of tropical medicine. He went on to serve in the Royal Australian Medical Corps from 1940–46 and was awarded an MBE in 1945 for his work on malaria control among Australian troops in Papua New Guinea.

While stationed in Queensland he met his future wife, Captain Bobbie Roberts, an Australian Army nurse who was also working on malaria. Thus began an enduring shared interest in medical research and a strong and supportive relationship that lasted until her death from cancer in 1996.

'I think two things – besides nurture and nature – really contribute to a good life: the first is a happy marriage and the second is to pursue work that fulfils our expectations', he told *Lumen* magazine. 'I have been incredibly lucky in both respects.'

In 1948, he was offered the opportunity of working in New York for a year with Dr René Dubos at the Rockefeller Institute and upon his return was appointed Professor of Microbiology at the new John Curtin School of Medical Research (JCSMR).

Frank was universally loved for his generosity, kindness and his approachable nature. Professor Chris Parish, who joined the JCSMR in 1969 while Professor Fenner was head of the school, told the ABC, 'He was not the sort of man that trumpeted his excellence anywhere. He was always the same personality, very friendly, willing to talk to anyone about science. The most junior technician or scientist could come up to him and ask him questions about