



<http://dx.doi.org/10.11646/zootaxa.3680.1.3>

<http://zoobank.org/urn:lsid:zoobank.org:pub:F335900E-84F2-430F-A927-4F0D84C59700>

Obituary—Donald Henry Colless 1922–2012

DAVID K. YEATES¹ & PETER S. CRANSTON²

¹*Schlinger Fellow and Director, The Australian National Insect Collection, CSIRO Ecosystem Sciences, GPO Box 1700 Canberra ACT 2601 Australia*

²*Adjunct Professor, Research School of Biology, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia*

Abstract

Donald Henry Colless (24 August 1922–16 February 2012) was a taxonomist at the Australian National Insect Collection (ANIC) from 1960 until his retirement in 1987. He continued working in ANIC as an Honorary Fellow until his death in 2012. Don's main scientific interests were in the taxonomy and biology of true flies, and in the theory of phylogenetic reconstruction and classification. Don was trained in entomology at the University of Sydney, and spent nearly two decades of his early career in Asia studying mosquitoes and disease transmission, first in the Army during the Second World War in New Guinea and Borneo (1942–45), then after the war in North Borneo (1947–1952) and as a lecturer in the Department of Parasitology at the University of Malaya (1952–1960) in Singapore. We list the 127 scientific papers and book chapters that Don published during his scientific career that spanned 64 years. Six of these papers were published in the prestigious international journal *Nature*, and he was Chief Curator of the ANIC from 1971–1977. Don had extremely broad taxonomic interests, publishing on the taxonomy of 18 families of Diptera that spanned the phylogenetic breadth of the order. He described as new to science the fly families Perissommatidae and Axiniidae, thirteen new genera and over 120 species and, with David McAlpine, authored the Diptera chapters in both editions of *The Insects of Australia* (Melbourne University Press, 1970 and 1991). He published a number of influential critiques of cladistic theory in the 1960's and 1970's, and advocated a phenetic approach to the discovery of taxonomic groups, and phylogenetic reconstruction.

"I see classifications as providing "a precise lingua franca that will be as independent as possible of conflicting theories"...Moreover it seems true that our classifications are used mainly in everyday biology not (as some authors seem to believe) biogeography, and this is where they are most rigorously tested—not for their truth, but their utility." Colless (1982: 102).

School and University

Donald Henry Colless was born on the 22nd August 1922 in the small township of Uralla, just south of Armidale in northern N.S.W. Don's parents, Clifton and Danetta Colless, were farmers at the nearby Returned Soldiers Settlement of Kentucky South. His early childhood must have been Spartan -Kentucky South (30°48'12.40"S, 151°27'11.58"E, 1079m elevation) had no electricity, running water, telephone, motor cars, radio or sealed roads in those days.

Don began his schooling at the one-teacher Kentucky South Public School and obviously was a bright student because after his 6th year of school was awarded a Bursary to Armidale High. This was a welcome benefit as the great depression was beginning to influence the economic prospects of the region by this time. Don did well at high school, being Dux of the class in 1st and 2nd years. In 1937 he moved with his sister Peg to attend school in Sydney, living with a relative and with Don attending North Sydney High School. He sat for the Leaving Certificate in 1938, doing well enough to earn a small bursary and scholarship to pay University fees.