

# Rupert Vallentine 1917-2010

by David Marr

**T**he death of Rupert Vallentine at the age of 92 has thinned the surviving ranks of those pioneer academics who built the universities of post-war Australia.

A fine engineer and an endearing man, he had a hand in the early days of the University of New South Wales and was foundation professor of civil engineering at the University of Newcastle before bringing peace to the fractious School of Civil Engineering at his old university.

His lifelong study was the behaviour of water. "Of all substances, it is truly the essence of the physical existence that we know," he wrote in his 1967 *Pelican Original Water in the Service of Man*. "To man, it is as important as the air he breathes."

Harold Rupert Vallentine was the fifth of eight brothers born in 1917 in Sydney to a family of English, Jewish and probably Polish extraction. To a 1939 diploma in local government engineering at the Sydney Tech he added a bachelor of civil engineering at Sydney University in 1943 then went north to build bridges for the army in Borneo.

At war he discovered teaching – ad hoc talks to troops and chess to Japanese POWs – and met Joan Sandison, an army nurse on the Wanganella who, after a brief courtship in 1945, agreed, in her words: "To give it a go."

They lived at a dozen addresses in Australia and North America as Vallentine pursued further qualifications including a masters in science at the University of Iowa for which he had a Fulbright Scholarship. He toyed with industry, grew bored and returned to teaching.

Vallentine helped design the first civil engineering degree program of the University of New South Wales in the late 1940s and later the first masters program in structures and hydraulics. He persuaded the university to establish the Water Research Laboratory at Manly Vale which he ran from 1958 to 1964.

The vice-chancellor Sir Philip Baxter called him back from Newcastle in 1968 to end the open warfare that had broken out in the engineering faculty. The rather courtly Vallentine brought calm to the campus. "All the explosions in the school virtually vanished," recalled a veteran of

that time, Emeritus Professor Al Willis. "Everybody liked him. Everyone admired him."

In 1978 he became dean of engineering and three years later after what he called "a bit of upward mobility" he was appointed pro-vice-chancellor. He discovered to his surprise that he found administration extremely rewarding.

After his retirement in 1982, this lovable and distinguished man suffered a number of blows. Widowed, he moved to Lulworth in Elizabeth Bay where he spent the last half dozen years as a witty and infinitely polite old man. He died there quietly on Wednesday 29 September.

This year the University of New South Wales began the Rupert Vallentine Fellowship Scheme to celebrate the career of "a visionary researcher, educator, strategic thinker and humanitarian". ■

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This is an abridged version of an obituary that appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald*