

UNSUNG HEROES WHO BROKE THE MOULD

July 21 1969 is memorable for me because the first man set foot on the moon and I became the first person responsible for the market development of the bipyridyls in Western Australia! Nearly half a century later, this is an attempt to honour some of my ICI colleagues who wrote the first chapter of one of the great innovations in broad acre farming. I do so in the knowledge that we all tend to write our own unique version of events, so take full responsibility for all omissions, distortions, etc. Inevitably this will also highlight some of the wins, walls and wisdom gleaned from introducing a radical alternative to deeply entrenched practices – both in the external market place and within the organisation responsible.



My ICI story actually started at the Melbourne head office. After signing up at 1 Nicholson St with the guidance of Pat Bell, the thoughtful HR man who helped launch the rural career of many a bushy tail, my induction took place in the ICI watering hole across the street. Whilst watching the moon landing I was taught how to play Liar Dice according to Shep's rules – a great way to while away the time with the team after a hard day.

This somewhat mellowing baptism occurred under the watchful eye of Geoff Ireland, my Melbourne boss, his side-kick John Orr, and Dr Eric Shepherd, the company vet. Largely by example, these men taught an invincible 25 year old what it meant to combine commercial acumen with technical integrity, whilst being a gentleman and larrikin at the same time.

Further up the line, GRI reported to Norman Caldwell, a gentleman without a streak of larrikin, who in turn reported to Alden Berry, the seemingly inscrutable big chap in the corner office. Sir Archibald Glenn, one of Australia's most distinguished industrial giants, was at the helm of ICIANZ. Sir Archie always took a close interest in rural matters and knew how to represent the Australian interests, even though the mother company owned 62.5% of the shares. Incidentally, Imperial Chemical Industries was one of the greatest British institutions during the twentieth century, frequently described as the bellwether of the British economy.

We were loyal and valued employees, enjoying the full support of our management, although I suspect my bosses delegated, with some trepidation, the vexing question of how to get some payback for the money and resources the company had invested in WA. I was warmly welcomed by the eclectic local team – three Poms in Northam, a Scotsman from Lake Varley, a lone eastern-stater down at Katanning, and the state sales manager.

Dr David Barrett led the ICI Plant Protection team seconded from Fernhurst in West Sussex, a beautiful example of the green and pleasant land. 'Doc' did most of the spruiking, while Terry Wiles and Mike Barker were doers, ably complemented by Ian Fletcher, known of course as 'Fletch'. The three musketeers were the kind of Brits despatched to colonise the unknown. However, only an adventurous Scot would buy a one-way ticket to the wide horizon and big sky, 400 kilometres inland from Perth, to advise the locals on how to be better farmers; and probably only one Scot at that. Bill Roy and I established a fantastic working relationship. Och aye, he was dour for sure, but a passionate visionary of high principle and intellect, with a dry wit.

This project was a very different challenge for Vern Scantleton and his sales team. Knock-about characters like Jimmy McCracken were accustomed to selling herbicides for broadleaf weeds, ryegrass and wild oats, and sheep drenches and dips for internal and external parasites. So they had to grapple with the difference between discussing how to solve problems and how to improve productivity. They needed to be equipped to identify and connect with the right farmers, and bring along the merchandise people, who were mainly from Wesfarmers, Elders and Dalgetys. They also needed the confidence to counter negative reactions ranging from scepticism to outright hostility. For some this presented new opportunities and new horizons. For example, Neil (Nobby) Clarke, another canny and contagious Scot, rose through the sales ranks to become a well-known national guru in this field.

From the outset I had been convinced that we should go with a strong, single, clear proposition, rather than confusing everyone with belts and braces options to minimise risk, including direct drilling with a triple disc drill, the use of a modified combine, and several programmes that combined cultivation, spraying and seeding. Unfortunately there did not seem to be a clear technical winner, and to complicate things, 1969 was a very dry year.

We eventually decided to roll the dice and go for the radical alternative to cultivation, using a boom spray and standard combine. With great excitement and a modicum of fanfare we formally launched the 'spray-seeding' concept in October 1969 at Northam. To mitigate the risk we made it very clear that such an option demanded a particularly high standard of crop husbandry and strict adherence to an integrated system:

- Graze hard the preceding year to minimise grass seed set and trash
- Graze hard from the break of the season
- Spray with the paraquat/diquat combination
- Seed within 2-3 days, with full-cut combine to capitalise on the root release and double knock

It is worth mentioning that in the early sixties I studied a newly published book called 'Diffusion of Innovations' by Everett Rogers, as part of my Agricultural Science degree at Melbourne University. I instinctively understood his findings, derived from research into the way innovations were progressively adopted across farming communities in the US – starting with the most proactive and influential and then supporting their advocacy. The direct drilling project was the first of many opportunities over the years to apply this thinking, and it has the same appeal today for those with innovations wishing to take the line of least resistance, both across external markets and within organisations.

Back in WA, the cost of chemical was a real sticking point. Bill Roy did the numbers to support a business case for a massive price reduction. The target was to come in under the magic \$2 per acre level, a mere 40% reduction from around \$3.30 as I recall. Because ICI Plant Protection would have to wear this discount, our bosses back in Melbourne laughed us out of court. However we persisted. Bill took time out from a trip to Scotland to visit Fernhurst, which led to an economist being sent out to do an appraisal several weeks later. Then, after much pleading they permitted me to fly over and seal the deal – ah the invincibility of youth.

We believed we were bringing to the table the promise of an exciting new opportunity, although the inherent commercial risks were apparent. We said we could dramatically increase the volume via the broad acre market, but only at a markedly lower price. At that time Gramoxone (paraquat) and Reglone (diquat) were valuable assets, positioned in intensive horticultural markets around the world as cutting edge herbicides, backed by expensive R&D. How could their pricing be protected? Critically, Gerry Jenkins, an ebullient Welshman and our UK contact, had been persuaded by our proposed plan to introduce a lower priced, specially formulated combination for broad acre use only. He became a strong advocate upstairs. On my departure I was treated to a classy dinner by the chairman and several directors. Arriving at the restaurant heart in mouth, I was shocked to be informed that our proposal had been accepted.

In 1971 we bit the bullet and re-launched a combination product for direct drilling priced at \$1.99 per acre. I decided to brand the product ICI SPRAY.SEED in the hope that the descriptive name might evolve into the 'generic' term for this application, whilst maintaining its status as a registered trademark.

Later on, at one of our many educational field days it struck me that we could be too focused on the apparently overwhelming rational arguments – timing, cost per bushel (fuel, labour, wear and tear, capital invested in heavy machinery), erosion, weed kill, and pasture utilisation. As each of these opened up the opportunity for more questions, talk, and excuses for inaction, we decided to add an emotional appeal to our marketing. Having been raised on the farm originally settled by my Scottish great grandparents, I had inherited the innate sense of being a mere custodian, responsible for handing over the property to the next generation in good, and preferably better, shape. We produced a moving television commercial featuring a farmer and his young son, contemplating the future. We appealed to the heart by 'adding the melody to the lyrics'.

That boy will now be a middle-aged man, perhaps contemplating the future with his young son or daughter. The mists of time quickly erase from memory the previous generations who shared a dream, did the work, and rolled the dice against the odds, to make the present like it is. It has been my privilege to build on my WA experience by working with many other unsung heroes prepared to step up, take the risk, and break the mould – from technology, finance, drug development, government, military, and non-profit, to the Afghan National Police. I owe a lot to my ICI colleagues who had the vision and guts to write the first chapter for 'spray-seeding' in WA. Of course their successors who picked up the cudgels deserve equal recognition.



Author: John Thompson, Managing Director, Beechwood International Ltd, London; co-founder of the TEAMWIN Mobilisation Methodology – refer www.beechwood.net. Recently moved home on turning 70, to an undisclosed address in rural Provence!

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