

JOHN ROBERT VICTOR PRESCOTT

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By Dorothy Prescott

J.R.V. Prescott, familiarly known as Victor, was born in 1931 and educated in England. He completed his first degree, an Honours B.Sc. at Durham University, King's College, in 1952. Following this first degree he did two years National Service in the Army before returning to Durham University to complete a Diploma in Education, after which he taught at Washington Grammar School in County Durham, where he was known to the students as 'The Duke', after the Duke of Edinburgh.

In September 1956 he was appointed as a lecturer in the Department of Geography, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, where he remained until mid-1961. Whilst in Nigeria he gained a Master of Arts (Durham) and a Doctor of Philosophy from the University of London. His M. A. thesis was on the Ulster boundary, Northern Ireland and his Ph. D was on Nigeria's political boundaries. Most of his African papers were produced in the years 1956 to 1961 and are either of Nigerian or Zimbabwean (Rhodesian) interest.

In August 1961 the Prescott family migrated to Australia where Victor was appointed a Lecturer in Geography at the University of Melbourne. The remainder of his academic career was at Melbourne where he was awarded a Personal Chair in Geography in 1986. In 1983 he spent a year as Academic-in-Residence at the Department of Foreign Affairs in Canberra, working for the Foreign Minister, Bill Hayden. The work undertaken was an analysis of the geographical terms in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. He was also asked by Foreign Affairs in June that year to go to the Solomon Islands to consult with local leaders about maritime boundaries. In 1995, Victor became President of the Academic Board and Pro-Vice Chancellor at the University of Melbourne, a position which he held until his retirement in December 1996, at which point he became Professor Emeritus. Victor was known for his fairness in supporting students who had suffered problems at the Departmental level. He smoothed many paths through his wise judgement. His reserved mien belied his very strong humorous leanings and he was a raconteur extraordinaire, with a ready store of jokes and limericks appropriate to the situation.

He regards himself as a political geographer, the seed being planted early in his years as a student at King's College where he was fortunate enough to have Professor John House, later of Oxford University, as a lecturer. His early work focussed on Electoral Geography but swiftly changed to boundary studies. His first book, *The Geography of Frontiers and Boundaries*, in a series edited by Professor Gordon East, appeared in 1965. This title and two others were reissued by Routledge in 2016 after a lapse of 50 years.

Two sources of inspiration for him were the creation of the International Boundaries Research Unit (IBRU) at Durham University in 1989, and meeting Jonathan Charney in 1992. Charney successfully persuaded the American Society of International Law to fund a systematic analysis of international maritime boundaries. The death of Charney in 2002, after the completion of 4 volumes, was a blow to all contributors but fortunately by this stage the pattern of publishing had been well established and the work continues.

Victor considers himself fortunate in his co-authors, Clive Schofield and Gillian Triggs, who respectively co-authored *The Maritime Political Boundaries of the World (2006)* and *International Frontiers and Boundaries (2008)*. He was also fortunate in having a cartographer *par excellence*, Chandra Jayasuriya who drew the many maps illustrating these works.

After his retirement he consulted to foreign governments on maritime boundary cases and appeared before the International Court of Justice and the Supreme Court of the United States. In Australia, Victor appeared in cases involving native title claims to seas and the seabed in hearings before a Land Rights Commissioner in the Northern Territory.

He had excellent relations with the Foreign Offices in both Malaysia and Indonesia, giving workshops and lectures to their staff. He enjoyed this work enormously, encountering several bright and enquiring students which gave him great pleasure.

Apart from his academic work Victor was a psephologist, an analyst of elections, who called both national and state elections for the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) election television coverage from the mid-sixties until the late eighties. He started this work using only a slide rule in the years before computers became the norm, his forecasts being 100% correct.

His other work for the ABC consisted of writing political commentaries, *News Commentaries* and *Notes on the News* which were broadcast weekly for twenty years. These were the days

when the radio was listened to more than TV and his distinctive voice was recognised in many remote places, including in Namibia where a student of his challenged him in an off road eatery.

Victor resides with his wife in Melbourne where they have lived since 1961.

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