

# Ross Henry Day 1927–2018

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## ABSTRACT

Ross Henry Day was an Australian experimental psychologist well known for his research on visual illusions and for his critical role in the establishment of experimental psychology in Australia. This role began with his creation of Australia's first department of experimental psychology at Monash University in 1965. He also played a leading role in the formation of the Australian Psychological Society in 1966, and in the introduction to Australia of the study of human factors in engineering and ergonomics. He was the first psychologist to be elected Fellow of the Australian Academy of Science.

**Keywords:** Albany, psychology, visual perception.

## Family background and early years

Ross Day (Fig. 1) was born on 20 March 1927 in the small town of Albany on the southern coast of Western Australia,<sup>1</sup> and died peacefully in Sale, Victoria, on 22 October 2018, at the age of 91.

Ross's family background was thoroughly British. At various times within the period 1851–62, all eight of his great-grand-parents sailed from London to Australia on various three-masted barques, all landing in Melbourne or Adelaide. Such journeys took three or four months to complete. One set of great-grand-parents had already been married for 16 years before departing from London. The other six individuals did not know each other at their times of departure. All of these people settled in various parts of Victoria or South Australia.

In 1892, Ross's paternal grandfather William John ('Jack') Day decided to move from Victoria to Western Australia, looking for work. When he left Victoria, Jack Day had intended to travel as far as Fremantle (the port of Perth), but *S.S. Wendouree*, in which he was travelling, was scheduled to stop over at Albany on the way. Jack disembarked there, intending to return to the ship, but ashore he encountered the local baker, Ferdinand Greeve, whose habit was to meet all incoming vessels to sell his products to the crews. Greeve was at that time in need of a baker, and had learned that one of the passengers in *Wendouree* had completed an apprenticeship as a baker. That was Jack Day. Greeve offered him a job. Jack accepted it, and so did not continue on to Fremantle, staying instead in Albany and living there for the rest of his life.

Four years later, in 1896, Jack married Maud Clark, and they had a son in 1897: Harold Day, Ross's father. In the same year, 1896, Jack established his own bakery business with a fellow employee, Charles Phillips. Day and Phillips, Bakers, was a very successful business; however, after five years Phillips decided to become a farmer and Jack Day was left solely in charge of the bakery business, which continued to flourish until Jack retired in 1936. Ross recalled that in the later days of this business, bread deliveries were made by a horse-drawn cart, with Ross and his two brothers sometimes assisting in school holidays. As well as running a successful business, Jack Day was involved in municipal government, being mayor of Albany from 1915 to 1921.

Ross's maternal grandparents also moved from Victoria to Western Australia (to Perth in 1903, and then Albany in 1906), with their daughter Dorothy Curren, Ross's mother, who had been born in Melbourne in 1893.

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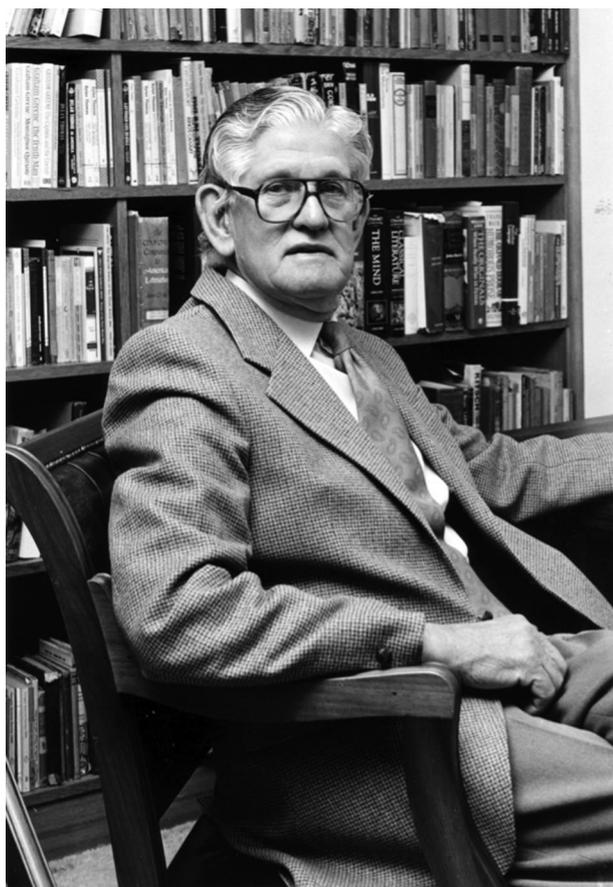
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<sup>1</sup>In the year Ross was born, the population of Albany was 3980. Epstein (1929).



**Fig. 1.** Ross Day in 1989 aged 62. Photographer unknown. Reproduced with the permission of the Australian Academy of Science.

Harold Day and Dorothy Curren were married in Albany on 28 April 1920, and had three sons, Lindsay John (born Albany, 1920; died Albany, 2004), Ross, and Warren Frederick (always referred to as ‘Snow’) (born Albany, 1937).

Ross’s father, Harold, was employed (at a fairly low level) in the bakery business. It had been assumed that when Jack Day decided to retire, it would be simply passed on to his son, but that did not happen. Instead, the business was put on the market in 1936, and Harold had to buy it from his father. He was not a success in this business and had to sell it a few years later. He then bought an existing bakery in Albany in 1943, and employed his eldest and youngest sons, Lindsay and Snow, in a business known as H. L. Day and Sons Bakery. This business of Harold’s also failed to flourish, and was sold in 1949.

In 1952, Ross’s brothers Lindsay and Snow established yet another bakery, Day Brothers Bakery. Their father Harold, who was at that time out of work, was employed



**Fig. 2.** Prefects at Albany High School 1945. Source: <https://www.albanyshs.wa.edu.au/page/151/Professor-Ross-Day>

by his sons, again at a fairly low level (he had never trained as a baker). Unlike the earlier businesses, Day Brothers Bakery flourished, lasting for over thirty years. It was bought by Tip Top Bakeries in 1987.<sup>2</sup>

## School education

Ross grew up in Albany. He was educated successively at three schools—Albany Infant School, Albany State School, and Albany High School—all within walking distance of the family home, and at the last of these he was a prefect in 1945 (Fig. 2). He flourished academically at school and it had always been assumed within his family that he would go on to university, which he did, entering the University of Western Australia (UWA) in 1946.

None of the three generations of Ross’s forebears referred to above were educated at a tertiary level, or had any scientific or academic interests (as was indeed the case for most Australian families in those days), so one might wonder how Ross’s own academic interests came about. Ross himself identified as an influence his Uncle John, whom Ross knew as a schoolboy. John Day was born in Albany in 1899, graduated in medicine from the University of Melbourne in 1925, and established a private practice in Perth before travelling to England to study ophthalmology at the Royal Eye Hospital in London in 1937–8. He returned to Perth in 1938 and had a distinguished career there as an ophthalmologist.

## Undergraduate education

In his first year at UWA, Ross studied physics, chemistry, biology, botany and psychology. In 1948, while still a

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Hansard/hansard1870to1995.nsf/83cc4ce93b5d4e0b48257b33001cfef6/066484579458071F48257A460014C571/File/19871111\\_Assembly.pdf](https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Hansard/hansard1870to1995.nsf/83cc4ce93b5d4e0b48257b33001cfef6/066484579458071F48257A460014C571/File/19871111_Assembly.pdf), viewed February 2022.



Dr. A. J. Marshall, 1910–1980

**Fig. 3.** A. J. Marshall. Photographer unknown. Source: *Australian Psychologist* Vol. 16 No. 1 March, 1981.

third-year undergraduate, Ross was appointed to a graduate assistantship, a staff position in the psychology department. He went on to achieve first class honours in psychology, completing this degree at the end of 1949. His honours supervisor was A. J. ('Tim') Marshall (Fig. 3), whom Ross first met in late 1947. Marshall had a profound intellectual impact on Ross, leading to his lifelong research interest in the experimental study of visual perception. Marshall had completed an honours degree in psychology at UWA in the 1930s, and was appointed a teaching assistant in the Department of Psychology in 1935. He completed a PhD at University College London, under R. J. Lythgoe, an eminent researcher on the neurophysiology of visual perception. Marshall's thesis topic was visual perception under conditions of low illumination and poor acuity, and he worked on this and other aspects of visual perception for the rest of his academic life. After being awarded his PhD in 1939, Marshall was unable to return to Australia because of

the outbreak of World War 2, so he worked for some years on personnel selection and training in London for the Ministry of Air's Training and Research Board, whose head was the psychologist George Drew, later to be Ross's PhD supervisor. Marshall returned to UWA in 1947 as a reader in the psychology department, a post he held until his retirement in 1975.<sup>3</sup>

Another person with whom Ross became friendly during this period at UWA was Corporal G. T. Snooke, a woman and undergraduate studying history, who was to play a significant part in Ross's future. Snooke had enlisted in the Australian Army on 27 February 1945 so as to be able to afford attendance at university, which would not otherwise have been possible (at that time the army provided a remuneration of £3.10 per week to its corporals).

Ross then decided that he would like to pursue his academic career in England, and Tim Marshall used his contacts there to look for jobs for Ross. Two teaching positions were forthcoming, one in Manchester and one in Bristol. Ross chose the latter, and took up the position in 1950.

## Bristol

The UK Ministry of Air had come to value psychology because of the very successful work in applied psychology undertaken in the applied psychology unit at the University of Cambridge. In order for these earlier findings to be followed up, the ministry established psychology positions for individuals in six universities, of which Bristol was one. This was the position taken up by Ross. While serving as an assistant lecturer, and supported by a grant from the air ministry, he did a PhD on the topic of visual tracking. His (nominal) supervisor was George Drew, then head of the psychology department at Bristol. Towards the end of 1950, Ross was followed to Bristol by Corporal Snooke, whom he married there on 7 July 1951 (Fig. 4). Corporal Snooke had by then left the army and was now simply Miss Grecian Snooke. Their first child Christine was born in Bristol in 1952.

## Sydney

Ross and Grecian could never get used to the British winter, and this was one reason why Ross moved from his position at Bristol to take up a lectureship in the Department of Psychology at the University of Sydney in January 1955. He was promoted to senior lecturer in 1959 and reader in 1962. Their second daughter Helen was born during that period (1958) as was their son Philip (1960). His time at Sydney included a sabbatical year (1961) spent by the family in the United States of America at Brown University.

<sup>3</sup>See Ross's obituary of Marshall in Day (1981).



**Fig. 4.** Wedding photograph of Ross and Grecian, 1951. Photographer unknown. Source: *Bristol Evening Post* July 10 1951.

There Ross worked with the distinguished vision scientist Lorrin Riggs, and observed at first hand experiments using the stabilised retinal image technique invented by Riggs, a technique that revolutionised many aspects of the study of visual perception.

## Monash

In 1965, Ross was appointed Professor of Psychology and Foundation Head of the Department of Psychology at Monash University, a position that he held until his retirement in 1992 at the age of 65. This was Australia's first department of experimental psychology, and many of those who worked there at, or soon after, its inception (including the authors of this memoir) have commented on what an exciting and intellectually vigorous place it was to work—thanks to Ross. This was not only because of his intellectual leadership, and his clear and incisive lecturing style, but also because of his personality—his affability, his infectious enthusiasm, his penchant for black humour, and his literary interests (Waugh and Wodehouse were particular favourites). He and Grecian provided frequent

opportunities for colleagues to wine, dine and converse at their house, making life in the Monash psychology department highly enjoyable socially as well as intellectually.

Ross's tenure at Monash had a large impact on the discipline of psychology. He was tasked with establishing a new psychology department, and for that he had a distinct vision. Firstly, he believed that psychology was a biological science and, due to his insistence, Monash placed his department in the Faculty of Science instead of the Faculty of Arts. This was a first in Australia. He also believed that psychology should be treated as an experimental discipline, and funded as such. He enthusiastically worked with and skillfully guided those under him and was admired for leading 'by example in a style of leadership which demanded inquiry, rigor, commitment and productivity'.<sup>4</sup> In a very short time he established a strong department that was renowned nationally and internationally, and he also participated in faculty governance, being Associate Dean of the Faculty of Science 1981–3.

When Ross retired, although he continued to serve Monash, chairing the Monash University Animal Welfare Committee from 1993 until 2008, he decided that it was in both his and his old department's best interests that he establish himself in another institution, and this he did.

## La Trobe

Ross accepted adjunct professorships at both La Trobe and Deakin universities. Moving to La Trobe in 1993, he set up an office and a laboratory, and made many contributions there to departmental affairs, such as organising and convening the department's weekly research colloquium. He supervised honours and postgraduate students, as well as actively pursuing research and publication, until he was well into his eighties. Ross is shown with some of his early colleagues and friends in Fig. 5.

The La Trobe psychology department is in the George Singer Building, named after one of Ross's students who founded the department. There is still a seminar and teaching room named The Ross Day Room in that building.

## Scientific contributions

The direction of Ross's research was established in his early collaboration with Tim Marshall, although it exhibited slight deviations throughout his long experimental career. Basically it involved investigations of the vagaries of vision especially as they were expressed in human visual illusions. Illusions appealed to Ross because of their phenomenal immediacy and their experimental tractability: they could easily be displayed and they could readily be manipulated.

<sup>4</sup>Vale Ross Henry Day, 31 October 2018, <https://www.monash.edu/search?query=vale+professor+rps+day>, viewed March 2022.

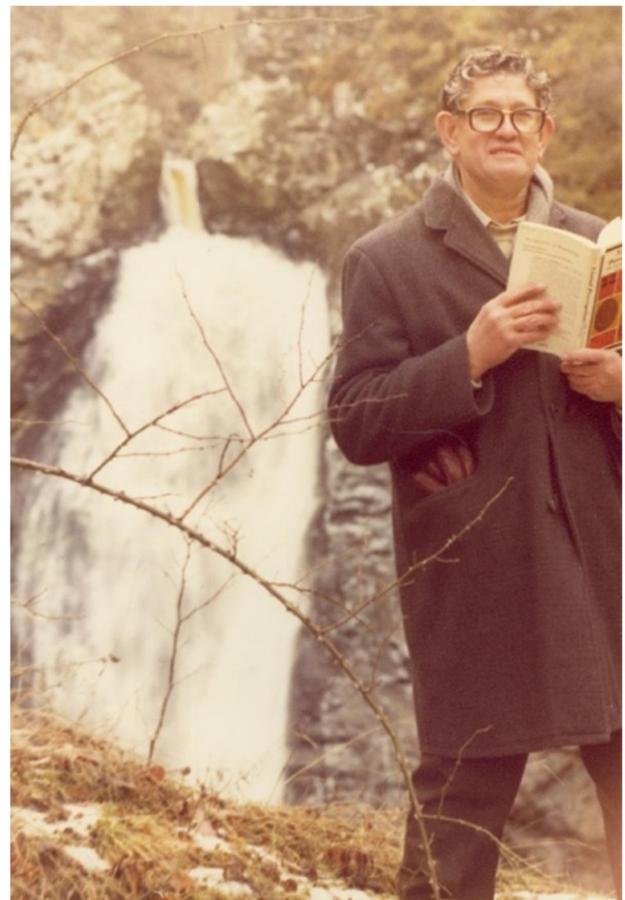


**Fig. 5.** Ross at 86 lunching in 2013 with Grecian and colleagues from Monash, Melbourne and La Trobe universities (from left Malcolm Macmillan, Edith Bavin, Ross, Christine Wade, Sue Findlay, David Findlay, Nick Wade, Jenny Redman, Dexter Irvine and Grecian). Photograph by Professor N. J. Wade.

Geometrical optical illusions, like the Müller-Lyer, fascinated him throughout his life and he published an English translation of the original German articles.<sup>5</sup> Among the other spatial distortions he examined were those of orientation, size, alignment, induced motion and after-effects, kinetic depth effects and illusory contours. He presented a general theory of illusions in the journal *Science*.<sup>6</sup>

Ross's first publication was with Tim Marshall and it concerned visual resolution during dark adaptation.<sup>7</sup> While his research was grounded in basic experimental psychology, with his move to Bristol it shifted into applied work. This concerned visual tracking under demanding conditions and formed the basis of his doctoral thesis.<sup>8</sup>

On his return to Australia in 1955 to a lectureship in psychology at the University of Sydney he was able to pursue his interests in the fundamentals of human vision. He had honed his writing skills in Bristol and his subsequent research was published in journals of the highest rank. For example, early theoretical articles appeared in *Psychological Review*;<sup>9</sup> they also displayed his desire to relate visual phenomena to the putative underlying neurophysiology. He also initiated experiments on an abiding aspect of vision—after-effects of spatial and motion adaptation.<sup>10</sup> Looking at a moving pattern for about a minute results in a subsequently viewed stationary pattern appearing to move in the opposite direction. Ross was later to make a 'perceptual pilgrimage' to the site at which this sight was first reported—the Falls of Foyers in Scotland.<sup>11</sup> Fig. 6 shows Ross reading Addams's account of what became called the 'waterfall illusion' with the lower Falls of Foyers in the background.



**Fig. 6.** Ross at the Falls of Foyers. Photograph by Professor N. J. Wade.

<sup>5</sup>Day and Knuth (1981).

<sup>6</sup>Day (1972).

<sup>7</sup>Marshall and Day (1951).

<sup>8</sup>Day (1953). Day (1954). Day (1955).

<sup>9</sup>Day (1956). Day (1957).

<sup>10</sup>Day (1958). Day (1960).

<sup>11</sup>Addams (1834).

An aspect of motion after-effects uncovered by Ross represents what is, perhaps, one of his most enduring contributions to perception: viewing unidirectional moving patterns in an otherwise dark room does not induce an after-effect.<sup>12</sup> The demonstration that relative motion is required to induce movement after-effects challenged the prevailing interpretation of them in terms of adapting directional motion detectors in the visual brain.

In Sydney, Ross was in a position to stimulate his students to pursue perceptual research, and so began a particularly productive period of investigation. His collaboration with George Singer produced a series of articles on prism-induced distortions and cross-modal transfer of spatial after-effects.<sup>13</sup> A clear sign of his growing international recognition was his selection to write the article on perception for the 1964 volume of the *Annual Review of Psychology*.<sup>14</sup>

In 1965, with his move to Monash University as foundation professor of psychology, he was able to establish a department that represented his experimental approach to the subject as a science. He was accompanied from Sydney by graduate students who shared these sentiments. Ross not only channelled their experimental activities but also participated in their research, often acting as an experimental subject. The staff appointments he made were astute, too. These factors fostered fertile soil for collaborations and interactions, which were evidenced by the publications issuing from the department and the enhancement of its reputation.

The first book in which Ross was involved appeared at that time, and it amplified the laboratory basis of the psychology he nurtured.<sup>15</sup> It was quickly followed by *Human Perception*, his successful textbook. The preface commenced:

Perception is defined here as the organism's maintenance of contact with its environment, its internal state, and its postures and movements. The problems and issues of perception can be usefully studied from a variety of viewpoints including those of development, ethology, information theory and personality. While the approach adopted in this treatment owes a little to each of these and other viewpoints, it centres on a general principle of perception developed in the course of teaching and researching in perception and clarified in many discussions with colleagues and graduate students.<sup>16</sup>

In the early years at Monash, Ross embarked on a long and fruitful collaboration with Beryl McKenzie concerned with developmental aspects of vision. Themes that Ross had

examined in adults, such as size constancy, were investigated in infants. For example, in one of their experiments with young babies they were interested in establishing whether, when an infant reaches toward an aperture in a transparent screen to obtain an attractive object, their hand is appropriately 'postured' so that it can reach through the aperture. The elongated aperture was either vertical or horizontal so that to reach and grasp the object the hand had to be appropriately posture-oriented in order to pass smoothly and unimpeded through the aperture. The point of the experiment was to establish whether young infants perceive and anticipate intervening apertures and prepare the hand postured appropriately. Remarkably, at around six months of age they were able to do this. Ross and Beryl also established that the phenomenon of size constancy—an object at various distances is still perceived as the same size even though the size of its retinal image is varying—is present in very young infants.

This body of work was summarised in a book Ross edited with Beryl.<sup>17</sup> Ross and Beryl both wrote joint, as well as individual, chapters for the book and provided a platform for the growing research output on infant perception from several Australian universities.

Ross continued research on illusions until he retired from Monash in 1992. A sign of his impact through those years was evidenced by the many farewell functions that were organised to mark his contributions.

As noted above, Ross's PhD had been in applied psychology—a project on visual tracking as related to aircraft control—and his interest in that field persisted. In the late 1950s, Ron Cumming (later to be appointed to Ross's department at Monash) and Russ Baxter at the Aeronautical Research Laboratories in Victoria developed the T-VASIS (T-Visual Approach Slope Indicator System) for guiding aircraft pilots in the final stages of landing. This was adopted at major airports in Australia during 1966 and 1967 and adopted as the international standard in 1971. Ross as an expert in applied visual science played a critical role in the testing and evaluation of this system and he and the others involved produced three technical reports for the Aeronautical Research Laboratories in 1960, documenting the system.<sup>18</sup>

Together with Ron Cumming, Ross is credited with having introduced the study of human factors and ergonomics to Australia in the early 1960s. He was chair of the Human Factors Committee of the Australian Aeronautical Research Committee (1966–88) and of the Human Research Factors Committee of the Australian Road Research Board (1969–73).

<sup>12</sup>Day and Strelow (1971).

<sup>13</sup>Day and Singer (1967).

<sup>14</sup>Day (1964).

<sup>15</sup>Singer and others (1967).

<sup>16</sup>Day (1969).

<sup>17</sup>McKenzie and Day (1987).

<sup>18</sup>One of these was published as Day and others (1960).

Ron Cumming was appointed a Professor in the Monash psychology department in 1971 and Tom Triggs to a similar position in 1973. Both were engineers but had developed an interest in human factors in engineering—Ron, because of working with Ross as described above, and Tom, because Ross had taught him when he was an undergraduate at the University of Sydney. These two appointments established Monash as a major Australian centre for research on human factors in engineering, and also led to the formation of the Monash University Accident Research Centre that is still flourishing. Ross was instrumental in recruiting Peter Vulcan as the foundation director of this Centre, where Tom Triggs was its principal scientist.

On 28 November 1979, Air New Zealand flight 901, a tourist sightseeing flight to Antarctica, flew into a mountain there, killing all 237 passengers and 20 crew. An initial report put this down to pilot error, but a public outcry led to the establishment of a royal commission that determined the disaster resulted from two factors, neither of which involved pilot error. The first was that Air New Zealand had changed the coordinates of the flight path over Antarctica without informing the pilots. This in itself would not have been fatal because the mountain would normally have been visible to them. But it was not, because of a whiteout, a weather condition in which the horizon disappears from view while the sky and landscape appear featureless. Ross was called as an expert witness to the commission in 1980 to explain what the perceptual conditions would have been like and why as a consequence the pilots would not have been able to see the mountain, though it was dead ahead and towering 10 000 feet above them.<sup>19</sup>

Despite introducing one of the first departmental mini-computers (a PDP 8) in Australia, Ross did not really embrace the computer world. He continued with hand-written correspondence with colleagues, setting them a real test of pattern recognition! All his research involved directly or indirectly the constancies of perception and deviations from it. So it was with the methods he adopted—he remained with measurements made with the eye rather than the seemingly unknown world of computing. While this has resulted in some of his research appearing dated the results they yielded have endured. Two centuries ago Purkinje proposed that visual illusions revealed visual truths and Ross shared this belief. Whether such sentiments survive in contemporary visual psychology is an open question.

A complete bibliography of Ross Day's published work may be found in the Supplementary Material that accompanies this biographical memoir.

## Contributions to psychology in Australia

The body representing the profession of psychology in Great Britain is the British Psychological Society (founded 1901).

An Australian branch of this society was established in 1944, initially with 44 members. Then in 1966 an independent Australian Psychological Society was established, initially with 941 members. Ross played a major role in this enterprise. He was a foundation fellow of this society, was responsible for drawing up its articles of association, and was chair of its Constitutions Committee (1964–5), a member of its inaugural council (1965–75), and its second president (1966–7).

During Ross's time at the University of Sydney he helped establish the biennial Canberra Perception Conference, first held in 1959. This was a forum to discuss and exchange ideas among Australian researchers on perception, their graduate students, and others with an interest in perception and related topics. This conference grew and flourished over the next decade, with meetings rotating between the University of Sydney, the Australian National University and Monash University. It attracted an excitingly multidisciplinary attendance that included psychologists, optometrists, and physiologists. This grew into a broader organisation, the Australasian Society for Experimental Psychology, whose inaugural meeting was held in Ross's department in 1974, and continues to meet regularly.

As mentioned above, when taking up his post at Monash, Ross had insisted that the psychology department be located within the Faculty of Science rather than, as was standard at the time, the Faculty of Arts. This practice was subsequently adopted in many other Australian universities, to the great benefit of Australian experimental psychology, which also benefited from his insistence, when he was a member of the Australian Research Grants Committee (now the Australian Research Council), that psychology be treated on a par with other sciences with respect to resources.

In 1990, he became the first psychologist to be elected to the Australian Academy of Science (AAS), having previously (in 1967) been elected a fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia. His election ultimately led to psychology being explicitly recognised by the AAS as a scientific discipline. At present the AAS Sectional Committee 7 lists experimental psychology as one of its constituent disciplines; and there are three psychologists who are fellows of the academy.

Other ways in which he represented psychology to the wider community in Australia include being chair of the Human Factors Committee of the Australian Aeronautical Research Committee (1966–8), chair of the Human Research Factors Committee of the Australian Road Research Board (1969–73) and president of the Council of the Lincoln Institute (1981–7).

Ross was an inspirational teacher, and his infectious enthusiasm encouraged many of his students to pursue similar perceptual paths; this might prove to be his greatest legacy.

<sup>19</sup>For an account of these events by a former Monash student of Ross's see <https://presentationmagic.com/2012/07/06/pilots-presentation-skills/>, viewed February 2022.

Grecian predeceased Ross, and they are survived by their children—Christine, Helen and Philip—and eight grandchildren.

## Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available [online](#).

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<sup>20</sup><https://www.science.org.au/learning/general-audience/history/interviews-australian-scientists/professor-ross-day-psychology>, viewed February 2022.

<sup>21</sup>Coltheart (2019).

<sup>22</sup>Day (2008).