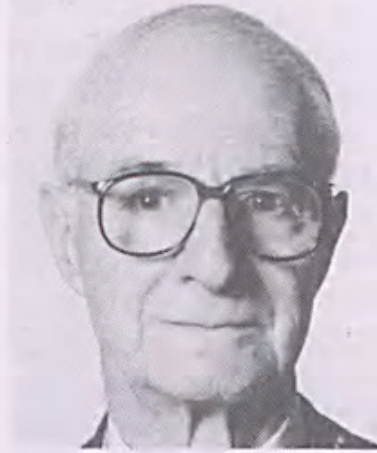


OBITUARY

DR JOSEPH (GIUSEPPE) GENTILLI
(13TH MARCH 1912 TO 1ST AUGUST 2000)



Dr Joseph Gentilli, an Honorary Life Member of the Club and one of the State's most eminent academics died at the age of 88 on 1 August 2000.

Joe was born in San Daniele del Friuli in Italy on 13 March 1912, but the family moved to Udine in 1923. After matriculating with top marks he attended the University of Venice to study economics and commerce. Joe's abiding interest was arts and science and he later transferred to the sub-Faculty of Sciences Applied to the Diplomatic and

Consular career and studied languages, law, history and economic geography. At that time most young Italian men were conscripted for military service and Joe was no exception. In 1934 he was appointed to a junior teaching position in the Geography Department of the University of Florence. In 1935 Italy invaded Ethiopia and Joe was called up. He was made a sub-lieutenant, and then made a decision that was to chart the rest of his life.

Joe was a descendant of an old European Jewish family and had strong humanitarian values. He could not accept the official Fascist position that the Ethiopian people were the aggressors against the Italians in Abyssinia and notified his professor of his intention on moral grounds to absent himself from the army and not be sent to Abyssinia. In Joe's own words he "disappeared over the mountains". Eventually he surrendered to the authorities and was court-martialled. Fortunately by then this war had ended and he escaped a severe punishment which otherwise may have even included the death penalty.



Group of Club members on Bibra and Jandakot Lakes excursion on 2 April 1950. Joe Gentilli is second from left in back row and Melva Gentilli (with large hat) is at the back towards the right behind Lucy Serventy. Photo: Joy Russell, now Joy Harnett, who was Assistant Librarian 1950-51, Hon. Secretary 1951-52.).

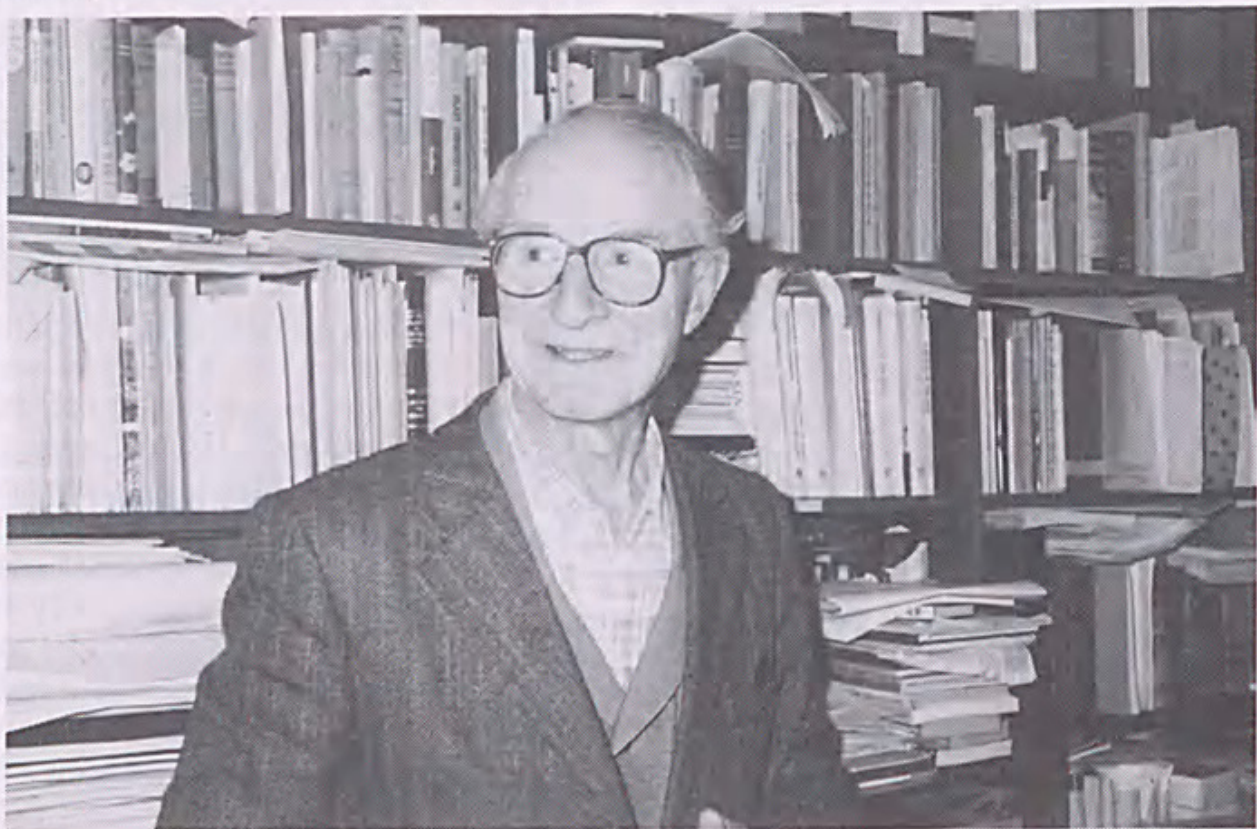
Instead, Joe was demoted and discharged from the army.

The future in Italy for the young humanitarian idealist was bleak and his university career was gone. The Italian Fascist leader Mussolini had formed an alliance with Hitler who had persuaded Mussolini to start repressive actions against Italian Jews. Joe Gentilli could not support such a regime and decided to leave Italy, believing that a free country such as Australia would be a better destiny. He travelled overland to London after applying to migrate to Australia. Even this was not without its difficulties. His entry permit to Australia required that he bring at least 300 pounds but the Italian government would not allow emigrants to take more than 200 pounds out of the country. Joe was fortunate in getting help from an Italian monk who smuggled the equivalent of 100 pounds under his cassock across the Swiss border.

In September 1939 at the age of 27, Joe

arrived in Fremantle on the steamer Ormonde and was fortunate in getting a lecturing position in statistics at the University of Western Australia. However Joe's abiding interest was in geography and he gradually built up this course until the Geography Department was created with Joe as one of its founding lecturers.

Even then everything was not plain sailing for the young academic. After Italy entered the war in 1940 on the side of Germany, Joe was detained by the authorities as an enemy alien and was imprisoned for a period in Fremantle jail. However with his background and academic record, Joe was able to convince the authorities that he was no threat to Australia and was released to continue his university teaching. Further humiliations were to follow. Ten years later, Joe attended a conference in the United States at the time when the McCarthyist obsession with communism was impacting severely



Dr Gentilli in his study at the Geography Department, University of Western Australia.



Joe and Melva Gentilli at Mt Cooke in 1951. (Photo: Alan Notley).

on academics and liberal thinkers. Immigration authorities, suspicious of all foreigners in the United States, detained him at Ellis Island. However, fellow academics were quick to protest and to voice support for Joe, and he was soon released.

Joe's scholarship and academic record is impressive. He published over 150 papers, books and articles in several languages including English, Italian, French and German and read books and scientific papers in other languages including Russian and Spanish. He also actively participated in other cultural and artistic organizations and was Western Australian secretary of Alliance Francaise for many years.

Joe's original contributions to geography have been extremely wide-ranging, most notably in climatology where he developed climate and rainfall maps, which allowed researchers in other

disciplines to develop theories on plant and animal distribution. He was the discoverer of the Leeuwin Current and also revealed how weather factors in the Indian Ocean led to particular weather patterns in other parts of the world. Joe was also a leading author in synthesizing climatic data into seminal books on climatology, which brought this subject to a world audience.

Other areas of research that attracted Joe included geomorphology, biogeography and later in his academic career, human geography. His background and humanitarian values attracted him to researching and publishing on Italian, Swiss and Chinese immigration into Western Australia, refugees in Australia, and social issues resulting from changes to populations in rural areas of Western Australia.

In recognition of his outstanding

original contribution to geography and climatology Joe was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Science degree by the University of Western Australia in 1981. He retired from the position of Reader in the Geography Department in 1977. Joe continued his research in the department having been made an honorary research fellow and was working on a new manuscript at the time of his death. This manuscript is now being completed and it is hoped that it will be published in the *Western Australian Naturalist* in due course.

Joe's contribution to science, culture and education have been recognized with a number of awards and honours including: Officer of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic, Bronze and Silver Medallions by the Alliance Francaise of Paris, John Lewis Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, South Australian Branch, Honorary Life Member of the Institute of Australian Geographers and the Institute's Griffith Taylor Medal, Fellow of the Royal Meteorological Society, Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, Member of the American Meteorological Society, Officer of the Order of Australia, Honorary Life Member of the Royal Society of Western Australia and Honorary Life Member of the Western Australian Naturalists' Club.

After arriving in Perth, Joe Gentilli became a prominent member of the Naturalists Club and held a number of executive positions which are listed below:

Positions Held on W.A. Naturalists' Club Council

Council Member: 1947-1950.

President: 1950-1951.

Council Member: 1952-1953.

Vice-president: 1953-1954.

Editor: 1956.

Secretary: 1960.

Joe was a very dedicated Club member and, accompanied by his wife Melva, participated at most of its meetings and excursions, leading a number of notable ones including bus excursions to Lake Leschenaultia in April 1948, to Jarrahdale in October 1950, to the lower reaches of the Swan River in July 1954, to the Victoria Reservoir in September 1954. He was also the main speaker at several of its meetings covering a diverse range of topics including zoogeography in March 1948, on films taken abroad in October 1953, and on fungi in June 1954 and May 1960. He was one of the driving forces behind production of the Club's handbooks and edited Handbook number two, "Natural History Specimens: Their Collection and Preservation".

Dom Serventy wrote the nomination for Dr Gentilli's election as Honorary Life Member which was read at the Club's Annual General Meeting on 5 December 1975. The citation reads:

"Dr Joseph Gentilli, a member of the staff of the Department of Geography of the University of Western Australia, has been a member of the Club for many years. He has served on the council and was President in 1950-51. In 1956 he served as acting editor the "W.A. Naturalist" when the editor was abroad.

His contributions to the "W.A. Naturalist" included articles on physiography, on bioclimate subjects and phenology. In connection with the last-named he organized one of the earliest schemes of co-operative team observation, on the arrival of the Pallid Cuckoo in the South-West. When he was President in 1951, he organized and edited a new and greatly expanded edition of the Club's handbook on "Natural History

Specimens – Their Collection and Preservation”, as the Club’s contribution to the State’s Jubilee celebrations of 1951. At the annual general meeting of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists’ Union, held in Perth in 1948, he presented a notable paper, “Foundations of Australian Bird Geography”, published later in the “Emu”, which introduced the concept of humidity refuges during past arid climatic cycles, as factors in bird speciation.

When President he had the Club incorporated, a step that enabled the Club to acquire promptly, Naturalists’ Hall when the opportunity offered. He led numerous excursions, and on these and others, he prepared sketch maps and guide brochures. He also prepared maps for other authors of papers published in the “W.A. Naturalist” and “Emu”.

Alan Notley, like Joe a former Club President and Honorary Life Member, wrote this tribute:

“I first met Dr Joe Gentilli at a WA Naturalists Club meeting at the WA Museum in early 1950. I remember Joe as an enthusiastic member participating in most excursions and taking an active part in Club meetings. Joe, his wife Melva, Kath Stewart, Bill Baggs and other Club members were also active members of the Western Walking Club.

Early in 1951 Joe was actively involved with the National Fitness Council in starting the Western Australian Branch of the YHA. At Christmas 1951 Joe organized a camp at Pemberton of Naturalist Club and YHA members and was our guide and leader through the Karri forests. This was a new experience for many of us.

I remember how he was so enthusiastic in encouraging younger persons to undertake projects. He introduced me to Rica Erickson and encouraged me to trial the key for her orchid book,

and later, on our bushwalks, to collect trigger plants for Rica.

Joe was a keen photographer. He had a darkroom set up in his unit in Nedlands and allowed some of us the use of it. He took many of the photos that were published in the Club Journal, and other publications. Examples are the photographs of the parasitic flowering plant, *Pilostyles hamiltonii* growing within the stem of *Daviesia pectinata* which were included in a paper by G.G. Smith titled “New Records of Distribution of *Pilostyles Hamiltonii*” in the *Western Australian Naturalist* Vol. 3, pp. 21–24 in 1951.

Joe was so enthusiastic about WA. This is wonderfully expressed in his publication,

“Weather and Climate of WA” published in 1965. When comparing WA with other similar climate zones including California he wrote:

‘from the point of view of a healthy, out- of- doors life, the southwest has an ideal climate, to be found nowhere else. Nowhere does one so fully enjoy a hearty well-being and the joy of being alive in a sunny land.’

Joe encouraged many to face challenges that they would not have done otherwise. The achievements of these persons are his memorial”.

My own introduction to Joe Gentilli was through his papers on climatology and the influence that climate had on animal and plant distributions. This gave real meaning to biogeographic theory and my interest in biogeography owes much to Joe’s writings. Later I got to know Joe personally and was inspired by his scholarship and cultural knowledge. His quiet gentlemanliness, courtesy, humour and advice made visits to his study very special. As Editor of the *Western Australian Naturalist* in the 1990’s I would visit Joe to discuss

referee and editorial changes to his manuscripts. He was amazingly prompt and meticulous about making the suggested changes. Within a matter of days I would get a phone call and hear his distinctive voice, "Joseph here" and be invited back for him to show me the changes to his manuscripts.

A full bibliography of Dr Gentilli's publications has not been published but one is currently being prepared for publication. Other obituaries and biographical information on Dr Gentilli include:

Armstrong, P. 2001. Obituary: Joseph Gentilli: (1912–2000). *Australian Geographical Studies*, 249–252.

Dodson, J. 2000. Obituary: Joseph Gentilli (13th March 1912 to 1st August 2000). *Journal of the Royal Society of Western Australia*, Vol. 83, page 99.

A list of the papers by Joe Gentilli in the *Western Australian Naturalist* is presented below.

1947 – Bioclimatic Controls in Western Australia. Vol. 1: pp.81–84, 104–107, 120–126.

– Micro-geography of Lake Leschenaultia, Excursion Report. Vol. 1: 109–110.

1948 – A Partly Underground *Boletus* of Extraordinary Size. Vol. 1: 142–144.

– Phenology– A New Field For Australian Naturalists. Vol. 2: pp. 15–20.

– With V. N. Serventy, The Blackwall Reach Cliffs, Swan River. Vol. 2: pp. 34–38.

1949 – Pallid Cuckoo Observations. Vol. 2: pp. 59–64.

1951 – Bioclimatic Changes In Western Australia. Vol. 2: pp. 175–184

1952 – Present Climatic Fluctuations In Western Australia. Vol. 3: pp. 155–165.

1953 – Amanitas From Kings Park. Vol. 4: pp. 25–34, 59–63.

1956 – Tropical Cyclones As Bioclimatic Activators. Vol. 5: pp. 82–86, 107–117, 131–138.

– Is The Western Australian Wheatbelt A Natural Region? Vol. 6: pp. 157–162.

1961 – The Survival Of Natural Environment In Western Australia. Vol. 7: pp. 179–190.

1972 – Aperiodic Starting Rains in Tropical Western Australia. Vol. 12: pp. 89–93.

1993 – Floods in The Desert – Heavy Rains In The Dry Regions Of Western Australia. Vol. 19: 201–218.

1995 – Notes on the Climate of Perth, Western Australia. Vol. 20: 65–91.

1996 – Seasonal Climates and Flowering Time. Vol. 21: 103–118.

– JOHN DELL



Dell, John. 2002. "Obituary: Dr Joseph (Giuseppe) Gentili." *The Western Australian Naturalist* 23(3), 231–236.

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