Taxonomic Note: V. B. D. Skerman (1921–1993), a Reforming Force in Bacterial Systematics and Nomenclature

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Professor V. B. D. Skerman made major contributions to the reform of bacterial systematics which are now in place and appreciated. He was the catalyst and a driving force for a series of reforms which led to the clarification of bacterial nomenclature. He reorganized the International Committee on Systematic Bacteriology and the Judicial Commission by persuading the members to accept and develop the statutes that govern their operations and also persuaded them to adopt a new starting date for bacterial nomenclature. The resulting revision of the International Code of Nomenclature of Bacteria and the publication of the Approved Lists of Bacterial Names under his direction leave a legacy of procedures for the orderly progress of bacterial taxonomy and nomenclature.

Emeritus Professor Victor B. D. Skerman, who died on 5 November 1993 at age 72, will be remembered for his dedication to bacteriology and for his contributions to the reform and progress of bacterial systematics, for which he received international recognition. He was born in Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia, on 4 February 1921 and graduated with a Diploma of Agriculture from the Queensland Agricultural College at Lawes in 1938; this was followed by a Bachelor of Agricultural Science from the University of Queensland in 1941.

Professor Skerman began his working career as a bacteriologist at the Dairy Research Laboratories of the State Department of Agriculture and Stock in Brisbane in 1942. This appointment was terminated in favor of postgraduate study, which led to the award in 1943 of Honours in Agriculture with a major in microbiology. In 1944 he took a position as a Demonstrator in Bacteriology at the University of Melbourne and became a Senior Lecturer by 1948. In 1950 he moved to the University of Queensland, and after successive appointments as Chief Lecturer and Reader in Bacteriology, he was promoted to Professor of Microbiology and Head of Department in 1962, a position which he held until 1981.

A number of themes relating to his interest in the nomenclature and taxonomy of bacteria run through Professor Skerman’s research. His skill at the laboratory bench and growing difficult bacteria led to his keys for the identification of bacteria (12–14, 16, 17) and his book A Guide to the Identification of the Genera of Bacteria (14, 16), which were widely used. In recent years the Approved Lists of Bacterial Names, which was prepared with other workers on behalf of the International Committee on Systematic Bacteriology (ICSB) (18), has had a major impact on bacteriology throughout the world; publication of this work marked the successful culmination of a long-held ambition to reform the nomenclature of bacteria.

The notion that bacterial classification and nomenclature were in need of radical change dawned quickly on the young V. B. D. Skerman following graduation. Faced with the challenge of identifying isolates, he soon realized that the process of identification, the practical outcome of classification, was a difficult and imprecise process, which was hampered by poorly characterized and described species, excessive levels of synonymy, and invalid nomenclature.

Professor Skerman was a practical person and given to active intervention, so it is not surprising that he embarked on a mission to reform taxonomic procedures. Early on, he recognized that success in his mission would depend on changes to the rules that govern classification and nomenclature and that the ability to influence change would require close involvement with the organizations which draft, review, and administer the rules. This understanding influenced his philosophy, and he began a career during which he was heavily involved and committed to the international administration of and service to scientific organizations concerned with microbiology, particularly bacterial systematics, and culture collections (20). Professor Skerman was not dictatorial in achieving the reforms, but he spared no effort in trying to involve worldwide contributions through extensive and voluminous correspondence to arrive at a consensus or solution. He always endeavored to induce colleagues and committees to be definite, clear, and consistent in all their dealings and decisions. He also contributed in practical ways, such as by devising the identification keys that he provided for several editions of Bergey’s Manual of Determinative Bacteriology (13, 17). During his career he was the Australian representative member on the ICSB (1950 to 1982), Chairman of the ICSB (1966 to 1978), a member of the Judicial Commission of the ICSB (1958 to 1982), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Numerical Taxonomy of the ICSB, a member of the Advisory Council of the International Association of Microbiological Societies (1962 to 1978), and Chairman of the International Association of Microbiological Societies Section on Culture Collections (1962 to 1970). He was the first chairman of the Queensland Branch of the Australian Society for Microbiology (1959 to 1961) and Federal President from 1965 to 1967.

Professor Skerman would be the first to recognize that the reforms achieved were the result of a team effort, but it is fair to say that the reforms might have stalled without his determination and will to see the difficult task through. Sneath (21), a close colleague in many of the reforms, paid tribute to Skerman’s vision and persistence, which were exemplified by the fact that his solution to the problem of excessive synonymy advocated in 1949 (12) was not realized until 1981, when a new starting date for bacterial nomenclature was adopted (18). Other taxonomists and close collaborators with whom he worked are co-authors of international reports and publications in which the reforms were introduced (see, for example, references 4 and 18). However, many others made consider-
able contributions as members of taxonomic committees or as individuals, and he always acknowledged the importance of these contributions. The path of reform was long and not without its critics and culminated in the publication of the Approved Lists of Bacterial Names in 1980 (18). A number of steps were required. These were: revision of the International Code of Nomenclature of Bacteria (1976 Revision) to allow the changes; a new starting date for bacterial nomenclature; compilation of the starting document of retained names now known as the Approved Lists of Bacterial Names; and establishment of official procedures for recording, publishing, and validating new names, including effective statutes of the ICSB.

Despite his extensive administrative and teaching commitments, Professor Skerman maintained an active research interest throughout his career and published more than 50 research publications and 9 books on bacterial systematics. His long-held interest in and research on the bacteria of natural freshwaters and soils were consolidated in the 1970s and 1980s with the publication of studies on the myxobacteria (8), the family Azotobacteraceae (22), and the genera Herpetosiphon (9) and Saprospira (11). During these studies, which were performed with various students and colleagues, a number of new species and genera of bacteria were described, including Chitino-

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REFERENCES