

Gentle, Stanley Wallace, Dr – Wal (by Anthea Kerr, from Australian Dictionary of Biography)

Forester and public servant, was born on 19 July 1932 at Tamworth, New South Wales, son of Frank Watson Gentle, a farmer from Armidale, and his wife Dulcie Melba Kathleen, née Webb, born at Tarana. Dux of Tamworth High School, Wal graduated from the University of Sydney (B.Sc.(For.), 1954) and received the Commonwealth Diploma of Forestry from the Australian Forestry School, Canberra. In 1949 he had entered the New South Wales public service as a cadet. He worked for the Forestry Commission of New South Wales at Batlow from 1954.

In 1957 Gentle was awarded a Fulbright travel grant and an Agnes H. Anderson fellowship to the University of Washington College of Forest Resources (Ph.D., 1963), United States of America, where he researched tree physiology. At the university's Laboratory of Radiation Biology (associated with the United States Atomic Energy Commission), he undertook post-doctoral research on the Marshall Islands testing program. He married Janice Marlene Larson, a dietitian from Glasgow, Montana, on 17 October 1958 at the University Methodist Temple, Seattle.

Back in Australia in the 1960s, Gentle studied pine plantations grown in poor soils. His development of assessment techniques to determine the available nutrient levels led to considerations of soil/fertiliser reactions that laid a scientific basis for the use of phosphate fertilisers in forestry. He also designed and installed the first forest hydrological experiments on a complete-catchment scale in Australia. While working for the Forestry Commission at Bathurst, he conceived a new method of calculating returns from pine plantations, which introduced some predictability in forest yield estimation.

In 1971 Gentle was appointed to the newly formed State Department of Environment; he became deputy-director jointly of the department and of the State Pollution Control Commission. Credited with introducing environmental assessment to Australia, he advised State ministers from three political parties on forest and land use issues. In 1976-77 he served as one of two commissioners on the board of inquiry into private forestry development in Tasmania. He was a member (1977-78) of the Wran government's land conservation study group.

Named an assistant-commissioner of the Forestry Commission of New South Wales in 1979, Gentle became commissioner in 1981. He was committed to a balance between the commercial and the environmental bases of forestry. Through research he sought to mitigate the impact of forest operations while improving their efficiency and productivity. He served on a range of specialist bodies, including the Australian Forestry Council's standing committee on forestry and the New South Wales Science and Technology Council. A thoughtful and challenging public speaker with a lively sense of humour, Gentle represented Australia at numerous international congresses. In 1989 the Institute of Foresters of Australia awarded him the N. W. Jolly medal.

In rare moments away from forestry, Gentle farmed lucerne and raised cattle on his family's property near Tarana. Other interests included opera, classical music, history, wine and politics. Survived by his wife and their son and two daughters, he died of a cerebral tumour on 25 October 1989 at Greenwich and was buried in St Paul's Anglican Churchyard cemetery, Muttons Falls, via Tarana. In 1990 the Australian Academy of Science, with the Institute of Foresters of Australia and the University of Washington Foresters Alumni Association, established the Wal Gentle scholarship fund for postgraduate study.