



Robert E White (1930-2021)

Bob White was a nuclear physicist who ended up spending a major part of his career opposing military applications of scientific knowledge taken from the field to which he had contributed most. It wasn't just that experimental nuclear physics was being squeezed at the University of Auckland, faced off against some cabal of the privileged wielding academic-financial swords. In Bob's case it was personal, an overriding frustration with where he found himself and no easy way to where he had wanted to be. So the peace movement of the 1980s was an opportunity to take on the mantle of a new obsession: the NCND policy of the United States Navy to "neither confirm nor deny" the presence or absence of nuclear weapons aboard their vessels, especially when they were visiting foreign ports. Everyone knew the policy was a farce, nothing more than a blanket cover up, but for Bob it was an affront that had to be reduced to a state of universal disgrace with irrefutable facts; and, in the process, the gospel of ANZUS would be exposed as a monumental lie.

He set out to obtain legal proof, meeting the highest scientific standard of truth, that "not denying" was actually a demonstration of guilt. The documents proved it and any government, anywhere in the world, that had done less than the 1984-elected Lange government, which effectively said "We don't believe you, we'll make up our own mind", was complicit in US nuclear policy, especially its holding on to the right to carry out a nuclear first strike against an enemy, as it had already done in 1945. As a result of his tenacity he eventually came to the end of his quest, but his final achievement and all the other things he had accomplished in the process were never properly recognised by academic officialdom.

The New Zealand chapter of Scientists Against Nuclear Arms was born in April 1983 at the annual meeting of the NZ Institute of Physics. Bob's newly arrived nuclear physics colleague, Patricia Lewis, was the midwife who knew what to do and Bob and I lent our support, along with chemist Brian Davis. Not everyone at the NZIP meeting appreciated political themes being discussed and referred to, but nationwide support for the initiative was so great that there were soon branches of SANA in four or five centres, everyone enthusiastic about participating in and applying their expertise within the context of the general anti-nuclear sentiment that was taking hold of the country. SANA served as an enabling umbrella organisation for scientists who were involving themselves in diverse activities of the broader peace movement, so it is not surprising that Bob was as likely to be found out on a yacht protesting the visit of a US cruiser or submarine as writing a tract about nuclear power or organising a meeting of SANA members.

By the mid 1980s Bob was devoting most of his time to peace issues, so much so that he found it possible to normalise what he was doing within the University's academic programmes. Aply assisted by Pam Oliver and others, he was the driving force behind the foundation of the Centre for Peace Studies, which opened at the end of 1988, initially housed within the Department of Physics. He retired from his salaried position in 1990, motivated partly by a desire to free up a position for a younger person who might "freshen up" the department. Bob continued on as Director of the Centre, serving in that role for 18 of its 20 years of operation. He wrote 10 of the 15 Working Papers published by the Centre, the first entitled "The Neither Confirm Nor Deny Policy: Oppressive, Obstructive and Obsolete". Much of his research for these papers involved working in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Wellington, examining files released under Official Information Act requests. He obtained access to a considerable number of significant documents relating to the history of the Nuclear Free legislation and its operation, not all of which are yet freely accessible. Bob was invited to a number of international conferences where he spoke on aspects of his research and other peace issues, particularly as they applied to the Asia-Pacific region. These conferences included the first international conference to be held in Vladivostok (in 1988) after the easing by the Soviet Union of relations with the West.

The Centre survived on occasional grants from the Public Advisory Committee for Disarmament and Arms Control and the time "donated" by academic staff of like mind with Bob, as well as visiting fellows and students who managed to gain degree credit for work on some aspect of peace studies. Then, in the same way as he had corralled around four score willing colleagues from disciplines across the academic spectrum to support the founding of CPS, Bob initiated the offering of a university course on conflict resolution in the Centre for Continuing Education. The course ran for three years (1994-1996). He also pursued an initiative to set up a graduate diploma course, but there was no support forthcoming from the University's power structures.

It was around then that the Centre was forced to transfer its administrative allegiance to the Faculty of Arts, the university hierarchy being concerned that peace studies was certainly not a part of physics and may not even be a proper academic discipline at all. It seemed evident to the powers that be that the Centre did not embody the appropriate expertise, credentials or experience to continue in its then current form. Subsequently, Bob and I attended a meeting at which we were told that Nicky Hager did not have the academic credentials to be allowed to join the Centre in an honorary capacity in order to continue his research into what we now call the Five Eyes intelligence network (then the UKUSA agreement). Thwarted again, Bob grumpily mumbled something virtually inaudible (a characteristic one eventually warmed to) and found a way to keep on doing everything else. In the event, the Centre published a Working Paper by Nicky entitled "The Origins of Signals Intelligence in New Zealand" before his monumental book *Secret Power* came out.

One of the most important events Bob organised was a seminar to evaluate the 1992 report of the Bolger government's Special Committee on Nuclear Propulsion. Our immediate boss, Head of Physics at Auckland, Alan Poletti, was the only member of the Committee who turned up and since the Committee no longer existed he was unfettered in expressing his personal opinions. He gave a scathing account of the peace movement's opposition to nuclear powered warships and characterised the movement's modus operandi as nothing

short of scurrilous. Champion peace researcher Owen Wilkes was there, having newly done a complete about turn on the issue, agreeing with Alan that nuclear propulsion was nothing to worry about and it was high time the peace movement grew up and stopped their scaremongering. However Poletti and Wilkes had quite different ideas about what the peace movement should be doing instead, Alan advocating that we embrace the post-Cold War *Pax Americana* and Owen declaring that there were "overwhelming important reasons for keeping out of military alliances with the US". We all had our say and Bob compiled the talks into a CPS Occasional Paper, a document that exists today as a valuable historical record of a significant episode in the unsuccessful struggle to prevent global developments such as the recent advent of AUKUS.

The Centre was finally closed in 2008, partly because the University of Otago had accepted a generous offer for the founding of what is now the National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies after Auckland had shown no interest in the proposition. Bob just kept on going with his own work, moving to Christchurch in 2012 and becoming involved in research into the shipment through some of our ports of cargoes of uranium material from Australia to the United States and other destinations. His health deteriorated in 2013 and he never finished the book he was writing on New Zealand's nuclear policy and its ramifications. He intended to provide wide access to the documents he saw as historically significant and not yet present in the public domain. Others of us, with the help of his daughters, will now see to it that this important part of Bob's bequest is preserved and eventually made available as a sort of "unfinished symphony".

Bob was a fairly quiet, unassuming man who did not compete for attention or prominence in the male-dominated professional environment in which he served. He respectfully had no time for all that nonsense. However, when he stepped out into the arena of the peace movement his modest working style enabled him to get on and accomplish what he set out to do and he greatly affected those of us who were alongside him. We will be reminded of him as we join our friends in Australia opposing the grotesque nuclear submarine deal that AUKUS has delivered. We will wish that Bob could still be here to help us.

[Thanks to Rosemary and Melanie White and Paul Barker for their assistance in writing this obituary.]

Peter Wills

[Recently retired from the Department of Physics, University of Auckland]