

Tribute to Dr Heinrich Pfeiffer

Gabrielle McMullen AM, President, Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows
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On behalf of the Australian and New Zealand Associations of von Humboldt Fellows, it is my privilege to pay tribute to Dr Heinrich Pfeiffer [27 January 1927 – 22 December 2016], who was so instrumental in setting up the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation's links with Australia and New Zealand. (In passing I would also like to acknowledge his colleague, Dr Dietrich Papenfuß [1936-2017], who died on 31 August this year – like Dr Pfeiffer, Dr Papenfuß served the Foundation for over three decades including from 1988-1999 as Deputy Secretary General and would have been known to many of you.¹)

Dr Pfeiffer, who died last December, was Secretary General of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for 38 years. He commenced this role in 1956, just three years after the post-World War II re-founding of the *Stiftung*. Over this period, he had a profound impact on the development of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation as we know it today and on its standing, both in Germany and internationally. From 1964 Dr Pfeiffer was also the *Stiftung's* Managing Director. Following his retirement in 1994, he continued to be actively involved in the Foundation as an Honorary Member of its Board of Trustees until his recent death at the age of 89 years.

The June 2017 Humboldt Conference *Limits of Knowledge* in Krakow was held in memory of Dr Pfeiffer – I think that he would have felt very touched. Originally, he was to have attended as part of the celebrations for his ninetieth birthday. The Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows was pleased that two of its members were able to attend the Krakow conference, Professor Hans-Albert Bachor AM FAA and Dr Michael Hall. In particular, Dr Hall had the opportunity to preface his conference paper (on the limits of knowledge in quantum mechanics) with remarks recalling the truly outstanding support that Dr Pfeiffer gave to Australian scholars and Australian-German initiatives.

When the members of the Australian Association were informed of the sad news of Dr Pfeiffer's death, the Association received messages of tribute – Dr Pfeiffer is remembered 'down under' and across the ditch with affection and warmth and deep gratitude. He was an outstanding ambassador for the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and for his country.

One colleague wrote, "Dr Pfeiffer dedicated many years to the welfare of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and will be fondly remembered". Another Humboldtian noted, "He was always easy to talk to and helpful with advice". A further tribute included, "He was a wonderful energetic invigorating person". Others recalled his presence at Humboldt Foundation meetings in Australia or the visit in the year of his retirement as Secretary General of the *Stiftung*, when Monash University presented him with an honorary doctorate. This was one of many such awards that he received.

In its citation for the degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, Monash University paid tribute to Dr Pfeiffer's "tireless engagement" saying, "it is difficult to imagine the Humboldt Foundation without Dr Pfeiffer. It is thanks to him above all that the Foundation, despite its many and varied

¹ Alexander von Humboldt Foundation website; accessed on 27 September 2017 at <https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/web/52776999.html>.

activities ... , has never become an anonymous administrative machine. Dr Pfeiffer's warm personal involvement, his willingness to help whenever difficulties arise, embody in the very best sense the Humboldt Foundation's commitment to the personal and individual sponsorship of its research fellows, as the members of the worldwide 'Humboldt family' can testify". Those of us here today who knew Dr Pfeiffer would concur wholeheartedly.

The University's doctoral citation continued: "Dr Pfeiffer has done more than any other single person in Germany to further and strengthen international academic cooperation and research. In honouring him ... we honour his life's work, not only as Secretary-General of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation but equally as a good European and citizen of the world".²

In his response as he delivered the graduation address, Dr Pfeiffer said that the award was "a recognition of the achievements of all the co-workers, friends and supporters of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation". He continued, "By serving, not by reigning ... I have fostered the academic cause. I have tried to do what is helpful to sponsor scholars on an individual basis".³ We have much to learn from him.

On the occasion of the Monash University honorary doctorate, the Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows arranged a dinner after the graduation ceremony and, by chance, the private dining room where we gathered had wallpaper in the distinctive green then adopted by the *Stiftung*. Dr Pfeiffer was very impressed indeed and reluctant to accept it was a coincidence.

Australian Association Fellow Dr Paul Lennox was awarded a Ludwig Leichhardt Fellowship by the *Stiftung* – this award symbolises in a special way the bonds of friendship between Australia and Germany. It was granted to Dr Lennox as an Australian geologist, with geology a field to which Leichhardt also contributed. Dr Lennox recounts that Dr Pfeiffer queried him about Leichhardt when they first met about 1991 in Frankfurt. This prompted Dr Lennox to research the story of Leichhardt and his scientific explorations and, at subsequent meetings, Dr Pfeiffer followed with interest Dr Lennox's research both in geology and into Leichhardt. Further, when Dr Pfeiffer visited the University of New South Wales in the presence of a Nobel Laureate, Dr Lennox made a bee-line to Dr Pfeiffer and not to his companion which bemused the Nobel Laureate! Dr Lennox wrote recently that he was touched by Dr Pfeiffer's personal interest in him, despite the hundreds of fellows dealt with over the years, and noted in his tribute, "That takes a special ability".

Stiftung President Professor Helmut Schwarz, in a memorial address in January, described Dr Pfeiffer as a "bridge-builder". He said, "Heinrich Pfeiffer's countless acts of support and friendship are legendary; they were founded on a cosmopolitan attitude that has become rare, on respect for foreign cultures, on an almost insatiable curiosity about people, that is, on all the virtues that the young Alexander von Humboldt described in the words: 'Friendship is a language spoken by the heart'". Walter Scheel, who was *Bundespräsident* when I had my Fellow's visit to Villa Hammerschmidt in Bonn, referred affectionately to Dr Pfeiffer as "Mr Humboldt".⁴

When the *Stiftung* informed the Humboldt family of Dr Pfeiffer's death last December, its accolade included the following, "Under Dr Pfeiffer's leadership, the Foundation developed into one of the

² Monash University, Doctor of Laws *honoris causa* citation for Dr Heinrich Pfeiffer, 30 April 1994, University archives.

³ Heinrich Pfeiffer, graduation address, Monash University, 30 April 1994, University archives.

⁴ Helmut Schwarz, Memorial Address for Dr Heinrich Pfeiffer, Bonn, 6 January 2017; accessed on 27 September 2017 at www.humboldt-foundation.de/pls/web/docs/F13010438/Gedenkrede_Heinrich-Pfeiffer_eng.pdf.

most recognised organisations in the area of German cultural relations and education policy. Heinrich Pfeiffer built up a network of trust among the individuals sponsored and supported by the Foundation. This network has made major contributions to international understanding and continues to shape the Foundation to this very day. The deep attachment felt by our alumni throughout the world, with whom he maintained diverse relations and friendships right up to his death, has clearly manifested itself time and again ... and has served to enhance the Foundation's standing around the world. The Alexander von Humboldt Foundation is profoundly grateful to Dr Heinrich Pfeiffer for his many years of service which he rendered with heart and soul".⁵ That is just how so many Australian and New Zealand Fellows remember him, as we say our fond farewells to Dr Heinrich Pfeiffer.

What we perhaps did not know about Dr Pfeiffer was that he was conscripted towards the end of World War II and trained as a pilot. Following his release from a prisoner of war camp, he completed studies in philosophy, history and education, and a doctorate in philosophy. He spent some years in school and higher education teaching before taking a position in the German section of the Fulbright Commission, which was giving scholarships to German students to go to America. From here, he was recruited to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation – thus began his life's work.

At the time of his retirement, the German newspaper, *Die Zeit*, published an article entitled 'Eine Erfolgsgeschichte des Wissenschaftsmanagers Heinrich Pfeiffer: Humboldts Seele' – 'The Success Story of Academic Manager Heinrich Pfeiffer: Humboldt's Soul'.⁶ Here he is acknowledged for acquiring the *Stiftung's* grounds, buildings and monies – this acknowledge sounds better in the original German with the alliteration of "Grundstücke, Gebäude und Geld"! Commenting on a certain mischievousness of Dr Pfeiffer and the arching of his bushy eyebrows during the interview, *Die Zeit* recounts that he was not yet 30 years old, when he started "his life's work". Dr Pfeiffer stated himself during the interview, "I was given a field, uncultivated and without weeds". This, he transformed into a flourishing garden where scientists and scholars, irrespective of academic discipline and nationality, could undertake research through international exchanges, advancing knowledge, understanding and cultural development, crossing borders and ideologies, and establishing a worldwide network of Humboldtians.

As Australian and New Zealand Alexander von Humboldt Fellows, we express our profound gratitude – vale Heinrich Pfeiffer.

⁵ Alexander von Humboldt Foundation website; accessed on 27 September 2017 at www.humboldt-foundation.de/web/48110722.html.

⁶ Haug von Kuenheim, 'Eine Erfolgsgeschichte des Wissenschaftsmanagers Heinrich Pfeiffer: Humboldts Seele', *Zeit Online*, Nr. 51/1994, 16 December 1994; accessed on 25 September 2017 at www.zeit.de/1994/51/humboldts-seele.