

Obituary

Sir Ian Axford

Distinguished New Zealand space scientist Sir Ian Axford died at his Napier home on 17 March 2010, aged 77. Sir Ian, who is survived by his wife Joy and four adult children, worked on many American and European space probes, such as *Voyager* and *Giotto*, designing robotic craft and calculating orbits

'His achievements were not only as a researcher, but also as a leader of science organisations,' said Garth Carnaby, President of the Royal Society of New Zealand (RSNZ). Sir Ian was one of New Zealand's most remarkable scientists and had a distinguished international career.

He was widely regarded as a 'rock star' of New Zealand science, and the RSNZ awarded him its top science honour, the Rutherford Medal, in 1995, 'for his excellent contribution to fundamental research which has led to a deeper understanding of the nature of planetary magnetospheres, comets, interplanetary space, the behaviour of interstellar gas, and the origin of cosmic rays.'

At the end of 1995, he was made a Knight Bachelor, one year on from having been named New Zealander of the Year.

Born in Dannevirke, January 2, 1933, Sir Ian was educated at Napier Boys' High, and attended university at Canterbury, Manchester and Cambridge, where he took his PhD in 1960.

He worked in defence research in Britain, Canada and New Zealand before spending 11 years in the United States, first at Cornell University as professor of astronomy and then at the University of California at San Diego, where he was professor of physics and applied physics.

In 1974, he worked for eight years for the Max Planck Institute for Aeronomy in Germany, which later became the Max Planck Institute for Solar System Research. He returned there in 1985 as a Director, overseeing the successful *Giotto* space mission to Halley's Comet in 1986. Sir Ian was President of Cospar, the Space Research Committee of the International Council of Scientific Unions, and of the European Geophysical Society, and Vice-president of the Asia-Oceania Geophysical Society.

He received numerous honours, including the Space Science Award by the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (1970), the John Adam Fleming Medal by the American Geophysical Union (1972), the Tsiolkovsky Medal by the Kosmonautical Federation of the USSR (1987), the Chapman Medal by the Royal Astronomical Society (1994), and the New Zealand Science and Technology Gold Medal (1994).

Sir Ian was a member of the Academies of Sciences of the US and Europe, and of the Royal Society of London and the RSNZ, and a Fellow of the American Geophysical Union.

For three years from 1982, he was Vice-Chancellor at Victoria University in Wellington, where he led the creation of the Research School of Earth Sciences and encouraged the development of the Institute of Policy Studies and the Stout Research Centre. Current Vice-Chancellor Professor Pat Walsh said Sir Ian was a strong supporter of the arts, particularly music, and championed improvements to the Kelburn campus, including the creation of the university marae.

Sir Ian was Patron of the Ian Axford (New Zealand) Fellowships in Public Policy administered by Fulbright New Zealand in recognition of his international achievements. This Fellowships programme, launched in 1995, was established by the New Zealand Government to reciprocate the Commonwealth Fund of New York's international Harkness Fellowships programme, by providing for outstanding mid-career American professionals to conduct policy research while hosted at a relevant New Zealand government organisation in Wellington. Former Prime Minister, Jim Bolger, now Chairman of the Board for these Fellowships, paid tribute to Sir Ian's achievements and patronage of the Fellowships programme, saying 'Ian Axford would say that his success in challenging areas of research was because he stood on the shoulders of those who preceded him. Ian Axford was a great New Zealander and his outstanding research is a beacon for others to follow. But Ian was much more than a scientist, he had a bigger vision, one of encouraging others to see that by working together we produced a better world.'

In his younger days Sir Ian was a fine cricketer, too, opening the batting for a New Zealand Universities (NZU) touring side in 1956/57 and representing NZU against Otago in 1957.

Sources: NPA, RSNZ, Victoria University of Wellington, Fulbright New Zealand and *Cricket Almanac of New Zealand*, 1957.