

OBITUARY

FRITZ LOEWE

'My time of wandering to unknown shores is over, intellectually as well as bodily. What is left are memories, some still clear and heart-warming, some already dissolving into blurred impressions and vague emotions. But I was happy in my time to have seen, understood and felt some of the wonders of earth and sky, and I take with me into the years that are left a remembrance of the great and the good I have been privileged to see and know . . .'

Those words were spoken 14 years ago by Dr Fritz Loewe when he gave his retirement address at the University of Melbourne. Yet for the unassuming German-born scientist who breathed life into the study of meteorology and who taught so many of Australia's most prominent met. men, it was far from the end of his travels or his work. That end came quietly and quickly on a cool Wednesday night late in March 1974, appropriately enough after a full day's work at the doctor's beloved university.

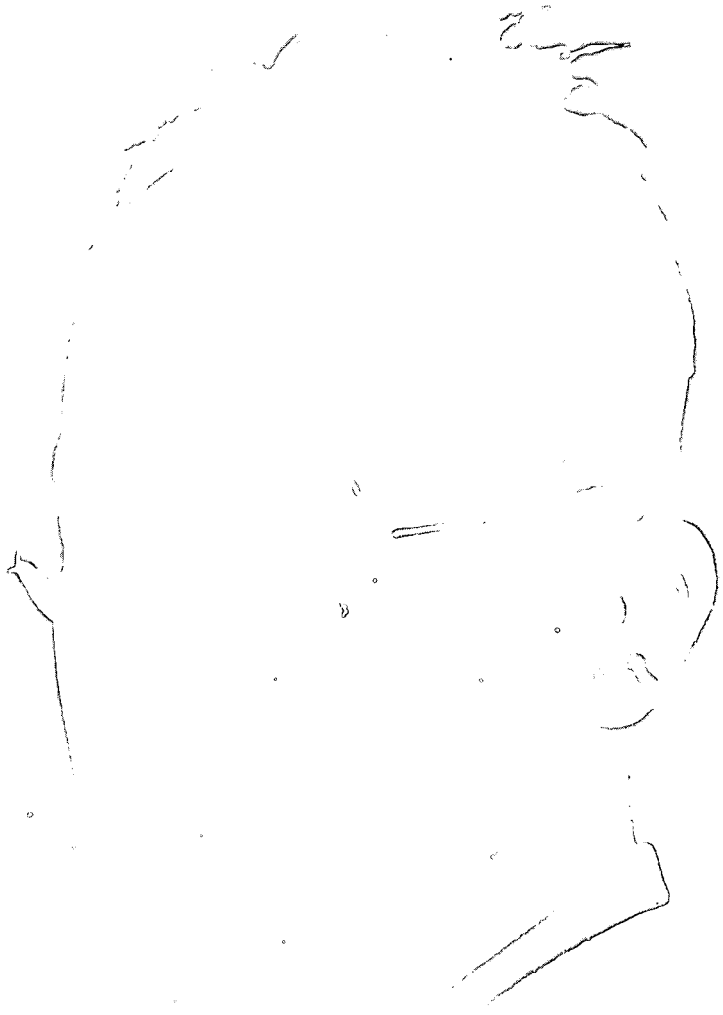
To most people who knew him in Australia, it was Dr Loewe's connection with the Melbourne campus and in particular its department of meteorology that first come to mind. Yet even before he first set foot in Australia 37 years ago, he had reached out to explore a dimension few other men have had the courage to face - the polar regions, where 'the small fiery ball of the sun shines from a dark blue sky and the rime crystals on the snow surface sparkle like millions of diamonds'. Indeed, it was singularly appropriate that on the Friday following his death, the 79-year-old doctor was to have addressed Melbourne University's mountaineering club. The title of that address, 'Sixty-five Years with Ice', captures a measure of one man's determination and devotion to his science.

Fritz Loewe was born in Berlin in 1895, the son of a Jewish judge. As a young man, he followed the fashionable and rather debonair trend of wanting to be a pilot, but his eyesight failed him and he had to be content with sitting in the rear cockpit, taking the measurements and readings that were to be such a passion of his life.

At the age of 18 he first became enamoured of ice and snow when he spent six months studying in France. He decided geography and physics would provide best for his interest in the elements and his judgment was vindicated in 1924 when he gained his doctorate in these two subjects, despite the intervention of the First World War and four years as a radio operator with an artillery unit.

In 1925 he met his wife-to-be, Else, also a geography student. They were married two years later and in 1933 and 1934 Else gave birth to daughters Ruth and Susanne. Both now are married and living in the United States, while Mrs Loewe is living in the Balwyn (Melbourne) home that was the base for so many of the Loewes' later adventures and trips. She is 72, intensely proud of her late husband's work, determined that she will not move again, and grateful for the respect shown her husband by colleagues and past students.

Dr Loewe branched out into radiation research briefly during the 1920s, working in Switzerland, and then moved into oceanographic work and the 'Meteor' expedition in the Atlantic Ocean. Then came his time with the Lindenberg observatory near Berlin and the meteorology research flights, undertaken in the most hazardous and trying conditions: old planes taken up to 6000 m, no oxygen, no parachutes and no insurance. As Dr Loewe himself recalled later: 'But our enthusiasm was inversely proportional to our meagre salaries'. They were heady days, but much



FRITZ LOEWE 1895-1974

more was to follow for the young meteorologist whose interest and capacity to learn knew no bounds. In 1929 he joined the expedition to the Greenland ice cap, an event marred by the tragic death of its leader, the meteorologist Alfred Wegener, and the young Greenlander, Rasmus, at the end of 1930.

Loewe, too, paid a heavy penalty. He lost all his toes to frostbite during an overland crossing and a fellow meteorologist, Dr Johannes Georgi, had to cut them off with shears while they wintered in an ice cave.

But Dr Loewe remained undaunted and his polar interest undiminished. In 1932 he was back in Greenland as adviser to the makers of the film *S.O.S. Ice Berg* and in the next thirty years moved from Germany to England to Australia, here to settle (if that is the word for a man who travelled relentlessly from his home) and build up this country's first university meteorological department. He was forced to leave Germany in 1934 when Hitler began his persecution of Jews. Dr Loewe was dismissed from his post, jailed briefly, then released and allowed to travel to England, where he studied in Cambridge at the Scott Polar Research Institute. It was during his time there that he was invited by Dr (later Sir Raymond) Priestley to come to Australia to be the first lecturer in meteorology at the University of Melbourne. It was an offer quickly accepted and in March 1937 the Loewes arrived in Melbourne. He was then 42, and in the next 23 years he taught virtually every senior meteorologist now with the Bureau of Meteorology. They will recall his encyclopaedic knowledge and his absorption with geographical and meteorological facts. His intense interest in meteorology remained until the last days of his life when he visited the Bureau for information on a project in which he was engaged.

Along with his training work, from 1937 to 1960 Dr Loewe conducted research into glaciology, and this interest took him to the Antarctic in 1947 (aboard the *Wyatt Earp*) and again in 1950 aboard the French ship *Commandant Charcot*. The following year, 1951, he wintered at the age of 56 with the French expedition in Adelie Land, and furthered Antarctic research with his work on heat and mass balance, and drifting snow. Later, he twice revisited the Greenland ice cap, and the many tributes to his glaciological work included a British Polar Medal.

When he 'retired' in 1960, it was to a life of further research, travel, and lecturing, with almost annual visits to the Institute of Polar Studies at Columbus, Ohio, a tour of duty in Karachi with Unesco, and constant world trips to see family, friends and fellow meteorologists. He enjoyed travelling and kept up a constant pace of work and lecturing, finally giving up his wanderings three years ago. Even so, he fitted in a three-month trip last year to see his relatives in England and East Germany, and then earlier this year he was tremendously involved in the IAMAP and IAPSO special assemblies in Melbourne.

When the end came on 27 March 1974, it was perhaps fitting to recall a further passage from Dr Loewe's 'retirement' address in November 1960:

'I can say as the night draws nearer:

"For seeing intended
Employed for my sight
The heights are my dwelling
The world my delight" '

(*Faust II*, Act V, Scene 4)

Vale Dr Fritz Loewe.