

## Alexander William Robert Bevan

BSc, PhD (U Lond)

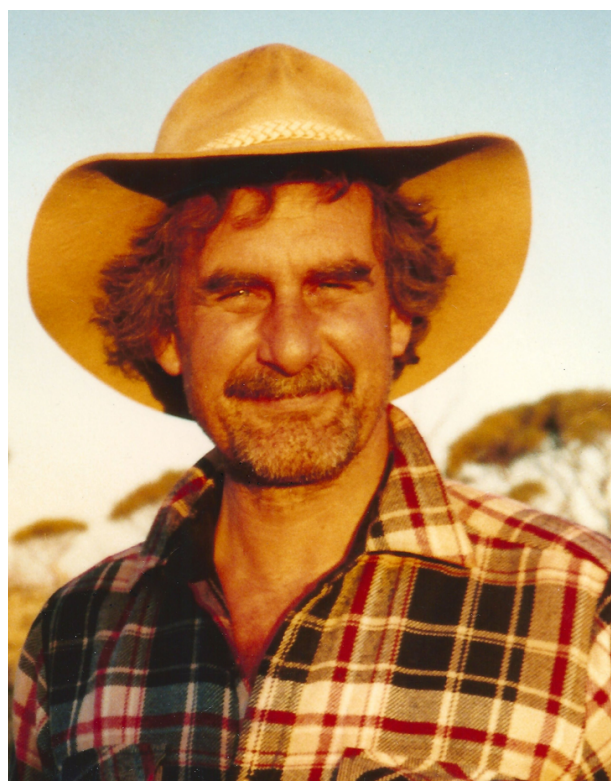
25<sup>th</sup> July 1951 – 11<sup>th</sup> February 2021

The recognition that meteorites accumulate in desert regions, and that co-ordinated searches could significantly increase the number of samples available to researchers, has revolutionised the field of meteoritics. The availability of tens of thousands of desert meteorites is now taken for granted. This year saw the loss of one of the figures who saw that potential and organized multiple expeditions in the Nullarbor Plain of Australia to make such collections a reality. Alex Bevan died aged 69 on 11<sup>th</sup> February 2021.

Alex was born on 25<sup>th</sup> July 1951, in Bridgend, Glamorgan, in Wales to parents Ceinwen and Colin Bevan. They lived in St Brides Major, a small village close to the central south coast of Wales. He was an only child who grew up roaming the Welsh countryside, including fossil-studded limestone cliffs and quarries, which triggered his interest in geology.

In 1969 he read Geology at University College London, obtaining his Honours degree in 1972. He first worked in the library of the Geological Society of London in Burlington House on Piccadilly, then took up a position in 1973 as Assistant Scientific Officer in the Meteorite Section of what is now the Natural History Museum in South Kensington. After some years there, and promotion, he began a part-time PhD on the metallurgy of meteorites as part of a joint University of London/Government Laboratories scheme. The work involved research at Manchester University under Howard Axon at the Institute of Science and Technology and at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania in the USA. He obtained his PhD in 1985. It was at the Natural History Museum that he met Jenny Leverton, a close colleague in the Department of Mineralogy. They married in 1974 and continued to work together, publishing several joint papers.

In 1984, Alex came to Perth to appraise and assist with the meteorite collection at the Western Australian Museum. While he was in Perth a meteorite fell within sight and sound of the city—Alex actually heard the sonic boom. The meteorite was seen to fragment, with one piece recovered from the beach at Binningup where it had landed close to two women sunbathing. Alex helped co-ordinate the search for other fragments, and was interviewed for television, radio and the press. Fortuitously, after many years of effort, the museum was in the throes of trying to appoint a Curator of Minerals and Meteorites. All that was needed was for final approval for the position to be given by higher echelons of government. The Binningup meteorite's spectacular entry into the state provided that impetus, so approval was duly given the week after its arrival—truly 'Manna from Heaven'. Head of Department, Ken McNamara,



strongly advised Alex to apply for the position and the rest, as they say, was history. Alex, Jenny, and their young children Sarah and Tom arrived in Perth in September 1985.

Alex quickly realised that the Nullarbor Plain in Western Australia might be a productive source of meteorites. A local bushman, John Carlisle, had found several meteorites there while out rabbiting, including the 11 tonne Mundrabilla iron. Soon after arriving in Perth Alex started a program of regular expeditions to the Nullarbor, which from the beginning had an international component. Taking the Antarctic Search for Meteorites program as his model, colleagues came together from all over the world to participate, camping and searching in the Nullarbor Plain for two to three weeks. The results were spectacular. By 1991, Alex's Western Australian Meteorite Recovery program had recovered around 500 meteoritic samples.

With the eye of a metallurgist, Alex would make fundamental contributions to our understanding of iron meteorites over the course of his career as well as continuing his research on meteorites in general. In addition, his success in recovering desert meteorites led to an interest in how they are affected by the terrestrial environment and what this can tell us about their age and history. That interest developed into collaborations

that would last decades: from meteorite weathering, to constraining impact rate using desert populations, and in the end to the concept of a Desert Fireball Network to track meteorites as they come through the atmosphere and pinpoint fall sites in areas well suited for their recovery. The Desert Fireball Network project became the seed for a growing planetary science group at Curtin University in Perth, which now has 50 staff and student scientists—the largest group of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere. It is a key part of Alex's legacy.

Although meteorites were important to him, Alex also actively worked on and administered the Western Australian Museum's large mineral and rock collections, and for many years was the Head of Earth and Planetary Sciences. He was involved in the organisation of a number of scientific conferences (including the first Meteoritical Society Conference to be held outside the USA or Europe, in 1990) and was an active contributor to several other societies and groups, particularly the Royal Society of Western Australia of which he was President from 2004–2006.

A significant aspect of his work was in public education, for which Alex made regular appearances on TV and radio, and wrote several books popularising the field. He carried out lecture programmes in Perth,

regionally and overseas, and was a main instigator of the 'Diamonds to Dinosaurs' gallery at the Museum, which took visitors on a journey from the formation of the Solar System to the footprints of the first hominins. More recently, his contribution to displays in the new Museum in Perth, in the words of the Director, 'stands as a tribute to his work and his commitment to engaging the wider public'.

In January 2018 Alex retired from the Museum after 32 years and five months, but continued to pursue his scientific research, and to teach and mentor undergraduate and PhD students, and post-doctoral researchers, sharing his enthusiasm and knowledge, even whilst undergoing palliative chemotherapy.

After retiring Alex rediscovered a talent as an artist—his favoured media being watercolours and oil pastels. Many friends and family now treasure the paintings he gave them. Alex is survived by his children Sarah, Tom and Matthew, his wife Jenny, and grandchildren Lincoln and Harlie.

**Phil Bland**

**Director, Space Science and Technology Centre,  
Curtin University**