

# Obituaries

Readers are invited to submit obituaries of 475 or 870 words, which should include dates of birth and death. Send a disk or hard copy to The Age Obituaries, 250 Spencer Street, Melbourne, 3000. Email [lifeandtimes@theage.com.au](mailto:lifeandtimes@theage.com.au)

## Productive stargazer led and inspired others

**ALBERT JOHN SHIMMINS**  
ASTRONOMER, SCIENTIST  
4-9-1921 - 15-10-2007

By **ROBERT SHANKS**

**A** FREQUENTLY asked question is "Where were you when . . . ?" For Albert Shimmins, a quiet but eminent scientist, the question was relevant to July 21, 1969, when the most significant voyage of discovery, Apollo 11, reached the moon.

Shimmins was in the control room at Parkes Radio Telescope, tracking Apollo 11 and relaying the television pictures to an audience estimated to be about 25% of Earth's then population.

It was one of those defining moments when preparation and experience came together: for Neil Armstrong and Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin it was stepping on the moon; for Michael Collins it was piloting the command module; and for Shimmins it was playing a key role in the team pointing the telescope that

received the faint signals that provided the television of the first moonwalk.

Shimmins, who has died of a heart condition at the Nirvana aged-care centre in East Malvern, aged 86, had already worked on other leading-edge scientific developments that helped change the world, ranging from early television screens and missiles to making significant astronomical discoveries.

In company with some of the most famous people, his career had defining moments; he often was in the right place at the right time. Yet, to observe him walking to the shops in Albert Park or Windsor in his later life — an elderly man with a walking stick and cap, careless of dress, carrying a bag with his few needs — conjured the visage of an eccentric.

But Shimmins was far more. He was a distinguished scholar and scientist, a man with strength of personality and a mischievous sense of fun.

His many scientific publications raised the sum of human knowledge. He challenged many

theories and, as a teacher, encouraged intelligent curiosity.

Shimmins was born in Middle Park and, despite his professional travels, he always returned to this area. His father, Cecil, was a marine engineer and at a young age his son had a chemistry set and enjoyed experimenting; he developed an interest in and constructed electronic devices, including crystal radios.

A diploma in mechanical engineering from Footscray Technical School in 1941 was followed two years later by a degree in electrical engineering at Melbourne University, where he then taught while studying commerce part-time, completing the course in 1947. He was awarded a master's in electrical engineering in 1952.

He was the first person in his family to earn a degree and he encouraged and inspired others to follow.

Earlier, in 1949, he travelled to Britain where he was employed by Electrical and Musical Industries (EMI), where he successfully worked on the

challenge to produce larger television screens.

Back in Australia in 1953, he joined the organisation that became the Weapons Research Establishment at Salisbury and Woomera, in South Australia, and later the Defence Science and Technology Organisation.

The Blue Streak intercontinental missile, a joint project

**His many scientific publications raised the sum of human knowledge.**

with the British, was the main development program during Shimmins' employment at the Weapons Research Establishment. He worked on the electronic guidance devices and systems for tracking the rockets launched from Woomera.

In 1961, he moved to CSIRO's radio physics division at Parkes, NSW, where the radio telescope, essentially a large tracking antenna, was under construction. When he arrived the hub and the radial ribs were in place,

but there was no dish surface and no control electronics. Again he was in the right place at the right time, and with the right people, specifically his brilliant colleague and telescope director, John Bolton (whom he later succeeded). The telescope was and still is the most successful scientific instrument in Australia.

Shimmins investigated and later installed the first computer to direct the telescope and record and process data.

He made significant astronomical discoveries and published many scientific papers. One discovery was quasi-stellar objects, or quasars (specifically 3C 273), brighter than a billion suns. The paper published in *Nature* (Hazard, Mackey, Shimmins) is credited as the first identification of a quasi-stellar object with an optical telescope image. His publications contributed to the first Parkes catalogue that became a standard astronomical reference for radio sources, and is renowned for accuracy, detail and breadth of coverage.

In 1981, Shimmins retired to

Melbourne and was awarded a doctor of science degree, the highest academic achievement, by Melbourne University for his publications on astronomy.

In retirement he resumed his hobby of oil painting as well as exploring his interest in quantum physics. And he built electronic devices, including early microcomputers. He also provided Melbourne University's faculty of science with benefaction through the establishment of the Dr Albert Shimmins Award, which provides graduate students with financial support to complete PhDs.

His outlook on life was well described by a quotation from Mahatma Gandhi, who observed: "You should live as though each day is your last, but you should learn as if you will live forever."

Shimmins, who never married, is survived by his sister Eunice, two nephews and a niece.

Dr Robert Shanks, professor of polymer sciences at RMIT, is Dr Shimmins' nephew.



## Committed to children and nature

**HELEN ALICE GIBSON**  
CHILD CARER  
9-10-1910 - 8-9-2007

HELEN Gibson, whose long adult life was dedicated to the care of children and the welfare of the natural habitat, has died of pneumonia at Upper Fern-tree Gully Hospital. She was almost 97.

Born in Forbes, New South Wales, the third of four children of Alice and Harold Gibson, she was the maternal granddaughter of Thomas Pinniger, a pioneer surveyor in both New Zealand and Victoria.

She spent her early life in different parts of NSW and was educated through the School Of The Air, before the family moved to Victoria in 1932, settling in Nar Nar Goon in Gippsland. By 1941 she was the only child still living; her sisters died young and her

brother was killed in action in Libya.

Gibson dedicated herself to caring for her parents, and as a young woman she trained by correspondence as a governess.

In 1946 she qualified as a preschool play leader in Melbourne. From then on she worked with young children and their families until her retirement in the mid-1970s. Many of those years were spent in the Dandenong Ranges, where she had moved with her parents in 1951, first as assistant at Belgrave Kindergarten and then as the play leader at the (now) Len Jeffrey Memorial Pre-School in Belgrave Heights, until the centre was upgraded to a kindergarten in 1970.

When Gibson left, the parents were devastated to lose her. She, moved to the Early Childhood Program at Knox Council where her "wise guidance and her calm" brought great joy to the parents and children.

Her love of children combined with her love for the environment led her to write a number of children's stories, including *Wooray! the Lyrebird*, published in 1987. Others were published or appeared in publications by the NSW Department of Education, and she won many awards for her work with the Society of Women Writers, with whom she was an active member.

Gibson was an active member of the Sherbrooke Lyrebird Survey Group from

the 1960s until 2005, when she was 95. She assisted the group's efforts to understand the needs of lyrebirds through methodical observations; she checked lyrebird mounds, located nests and banded chicks, using this accumulated knowledge to write her book.

As a consummate gardener, she had a gift for creating artistic and harmonious spaces, and her flower arrangements, both at home and at church, were always beautifully executed, masterpieces of understated beauty. (Every year members of the Society Of Women Writers gathered in her garden for their annual lunch.)

Gibson was a committed member of

the Anglican Church from an early age. She preferred traditional service and practice of her religion and held weekly Bible study groups in her lounge room; she also gave religious instructions at Belgrave South Primary School.

The bush with its native birds and wildflowers drew her to places such as Wilson's Prom, the Little Desert, Victoria's high country and the outback. Not for her the fleeting coach tour: as a dedicated bushwalker she preferred to be immersed in nature, observing, listening, walking quietly; a campfire at night and sleeping under the stars. Even in her 80s and less sure of foot, she was still walking hilly trails and thrilled when she reached the top.

Gibson had an abiding interest in history, and a deep respect for indigenous Australians; she was a supporter of the movement Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation, as well as the Southern Sherbrooke Historical Society.

In 1989, she grudgingly accepted a community award for her outstanding contribution as a quiet achiever, but reproached her nominee, saying, "I thought you were my friend."

Gibson had no immediate survivors but many friends and admirers. This tribute was compiled by members of the Southern Sherbrooke Historical Society.