

THE McMEEKAN MEMORIAL AWARD

A. E. GIBSON

DIP. V.F.M. (C.A.C.), F.N.Z.I.V.

The McMeekan Memorial Award is made to recognize an outstanding contribution to New Zealand animal production or the New Zealand Society of Animal Production, made during the previous 5 years. It was first established in 1974 and has previously been awarded to three men of science and one of the farming industry. Dr C. P. McMeekan, whose memory is honoured in this award, was a distinguished member of the Society and leader in animal production research and administration. He was an agriculturist who valued practical achievement. This year's winner of the award, Mr A. E. Gibson, has shared a similar philosophy in his career and would be one of the strongest supporters of McMeekan's belief that "research was useless unless it could be applied".



Eric Gibson joined the Department of Lands and Survey in Wellington as a rural field cadet in 1941. His training was interrupted by service overseas with the Fleet Air Arm in 1944 and 1945. After the war he resumed his studies and in 1949 was awarded the Diploma in Valuation and Farm Management at Lincoln College.

At the end of 1949, Eric Gibson joined the Head Office of the Lands and Survey Department as Assistant Field Inspector and from 1950 to 1957 he served as Field Officer in the Te Kuiti, Rotorua and Hamilton districts. In 1958 he was appointed Senior Field Officer in Blenheim.

He transferred to the Department of Maori Affairs in 1960 as Supervisor of Farm Training; then he was appointed Inspecting Field Supervisor and Fields Director in that Department in 1962. As Supervisor of Farm Training, Eric Gibson introduced training courses in farm management and budgeting for farm supervisors. It was as Fields Director that he was invited by the then Minister of Island Territories to visit Niue Island and advise on agricultural, economic and land development matters. Mr Gibson also visited agricultural institutions in Tonga, Fiji and Western Samoa to study tropical agriculture.

In 1968 he was appointed to his present position of Superintendent of Land Development, Rotorua. It is his contribution to agriculture while in this position that most members of this Society will be familiar with.

It is first worth emphasizing that the Lands and Survey Department at Rotorua has since 1941 developed and settled over 100 000 ha as 600 dairy and 400 sheep farms. At present the Rotorua Superintendency of Lands and Survey controls about 68 000 ha of grassland encompassing the coun-

ties of Tauranga, Whakatane, Rotorua and Taupo. Each of the 50-odd farm settlement blocks has a manager and staff supervised from the Rotorua office. With the objective of developing land, recovering the costs of development, and then making it available for settlement, the Rotorua district has been engaged in a large-scale sheep and beef farming enterprise, in itself a unique contribution to animal production.

In 1977 some 479 500 sheep and 47 800 beef cattle were wintered on these development blocks. This is a considerable responsibility in terms of people, land, stock and capital, and Mr Gibson has attained a very high level of achievement in integrating these resources. Livestock numbers have increased and, most importantly, the level of performance per animal has improved dramatically. For example, docking percentages have increased from around 85% on average to nearly 100%. This is a tribute to Eric's leadership and the contribution made by the Lands and Survey team. Large-scale development and the efficient farming of livestock have been undertaken with skill, initiative and determination.

The Lands and Survey Department, Rotorua, is also closely involved with animal research and development in three important fields:

- (1) Applied large-scale Romney and Angus improvement schemes.
- (2) Direct animal breeding research in collaboration with scientists of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries at Ruakura and Whatawhata.
- (3) Collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries Research and Animal Health Divisions in field and stock trials in disciplines other than animal breeding.

Eric Gibson was among the first to recognize the necessity for livestock improvement and the unique resources available for this within Lands and Survey, and to appreciate the potential of large-scale group breeding schemes. The Romney sheep breeding scheme was initiated in 1968 and is now centred on the Waihora, Otutira and Kakaho blocks. It involves the detailed performance recording of over 20 000 sheep each year. This scheme now supplies over 3000 selected rams of defined comparative breeding value for use in the Rotorua and other districts throughout New Zealand. These rams, with older sires retained, are now joined with about 500 000 breeding ewes each year. A similar integrated breeding scheme incorporating performance recorded information as an aid to selection and modern technology was set up with Angus cattle in 1970 under Eric's supervision. This nucleus herd now supplies over 300 bulls per year to the Rotorua and other districts. Semen from the top progeny tested bulls identified within this scheme has been released for use in New Zealand and for export. The effective integration of the land, stock, skilled farming staff and technological resources to generate breeding of stock of high merit on this scale is a unique achievement in New Zealand, and an example to both the sheep and beef cattle industries.

With this philosophy of looking for practical proof of applied science, he set up a testing unit on the Tihoi block in 1976 to evaluate the genetic merit of the rams and bulls bred by Lands and Survey compared with those available from commercial sources in industry. All these breeding projects have generated great interest in New Zealand and overseas.

The second major contribution of Mr Gibson to animal research and development has been through the support given to the initiation and running of direct animal breeding research undertaken on the Waikite, Goudies and Crater blocks, and recently on the Rotomahana block. A

wide-ranging research programme involving both sheep and beef cattle has been undertaken on these blocks. The availability of these resources has enabled such studies as the evaluation of exotic cattle, beef and sheep selection experiments, hogget lambing, exotic sheep evaluation trials and other projects to be pursued on a scale not otherwise feasible. About 50 000 stock units grazed on 6 500 ha have been involved in these breeding projects.

Apart from this work on genetics, Eric Gibson and his staff have actively sought to co-operate with Research and Advisory Division staff on other problems requiring solution on the pumice lands. Collaborative projects on animal diseases, fertilizer trials and insect pests are examples of other work which has been conducted.

Mr Gibson's keen interest in and knowledge of beef cattle performance recording were recently recognized by his election to the Council of the New Zealand Society of Performance Recorded Herds.

In 1975 he was awarded the Bledisloe Medal by Lincoln College. This medal was presented to the College by the late Viscount Bledisloe to confer on a former student who had materially assisted farming in New Zealand.

Eric Gibson's expertise and ability to get things done were again recognized in 1977 by his being invited to join Dr M. M. Cooper in a feasibility study of the dairy industry of Belize (formerly British Honduras) under the Food Production and Rural Development Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat.

An example of his special expertise in Maori affairs was seen recently when he was asked by the Hon. Duncan MacIntyre to join an expert committee to investigate the problems associated with the farming of Maori leasehold land. A clear and forthright report is proof of the work undertaken.

Mr Gibson was awarded the Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal in 1978. He is a Fellow of the New Zealand Institute of Valuers, an honour reserved for long and outstanding service to the valuation profession.

He has been a member of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production since 1973 and has been co-author of several scientific and conference papers.

Eric Gibson is a man who listens to new concepts and ideas. He has the ability to get to the core issues involved and to evaluate the potential significance and contribution of new approaches. He thinks clearly and has honest, forthright views on what are the important issues challenging farming. It is these qualities that his staff and others with whom he has been associated appreciate and value.

He is a practical man who seeks out new knowledge and the co-operation of scientists and advisers, and who can recognize useful information and then apply it in new ways despite the major problems that are apparent at the outset of any new endeavour. His approach, methods and achievements have got things done on a scale which few have equalled. These qualities of leadership are those that Dr McMeekan, in whose honour this award is named, would have applauded. It is the total of these contributions to the science and practice of animal production that the management committee of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production has acknowledged in selecting Eric Gibson as this year's recipient of the McMeekan Memorial Award.

G. K. HIGHT
President.