

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

DONALD M. WILSON (1933 – 1970)

To most of Don Wilson's friends, it will seem inappropriate to begin an account of him with the kind of historical biography one finds in curriculum vitae. There are those whom the past interests, but Don was not one of them; he lived mostly in the present, and thought mostly about the future. For the record, he was born in Seattle in 1933, lived later in Los Angeles, and began his education at USC and UCLA. After finishing his doctoral studies at the latter institution with T. H. Bullock in 1958, he went to the Zoophysiological Institute in Copenhagen, where he performed a series of experiments on insect flight that are now universally regarded as classics. He was the first to show that the pattern for such a delicate, complicated action was an inherent part of the central nervous system's wiring. He held faculty positions at Yale and at the University of California, Berkeley, before coming to Stanford as Professor of Biology in 1967.

Don Wilson's scientific work seemed to blend, more fully than it does in many people, with the rest of him. His life style was manifested equally in his intellectual efforts, his avocations, and his world outlook. It was characterized by attraction for challenge, by a refusal to compromise or to accept anything inferior, and by tremendous determination to see things through. Performance, to him, was the significant parameter of existence -- whether it involved the carefully planned ascent of a desert rock pinnacle, the preparation of an experiment, or an attempt to reshape society. His focus upon outcomes instead of intentions, coupled with his deep concern for the poor and the exploited, made him a proponent of radical social change. His pleas were neither strident nor self-serving, and they did not neglect individual decency.

He personified a kind of lean, stripped-down clarity of thought and purpose. It was reflected in his prose, which was spare and to the point; in his impatience with sophistry and decoration; and in the beauty and simplicity of his experiments. If it sometimes led him into a disregard of nuance, he would have held that to be a small price to pay for decisiveness and self sufficiency. He placed his standards high and applied them rigidly; but somehow he avoided presenting them as challenges, and instead urged and encouraged others to meet them. His students were strongly motivated to do that, and as a result they were unusually successful.

But Don Wilson challenged himself, boldly and repeatedly. Danger, as much as simplicity and clarity, was a thread through his life. In the 1950s he was an accomplished climber who was involved in a number of first ascents in California and the desert Southwest; more recently he had taken up the equally challenging sport of running white-water rivers. Death overtook him in this latter activity on June 23, 1970, on the middle fork of the Salmon River in Idaho. It caught him in characteristic attitude: doing something difficult and risky with courage and competence.

Donald Kennedy, Chairman
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