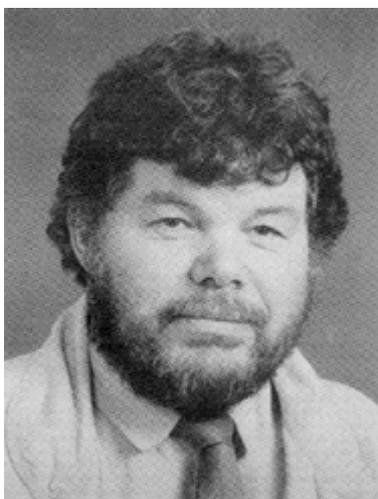


CENTREFOLD

Professor Jim Ansell



One of the most colourful figures in the NZ Mathematics community died suddenly in Wellington of a heart attack on 28 July 1993. Although he was due for an operation later in 1993, his condition was not thought to be serious until he was suddenly taken ill the night before.

Jim's contributions to his profession covered a large number of areas. In this valued part of the media it should be noted that he was the first-ever Editor of this Newsletter and was a strong supporter of the formation of the NZ Mathematical Society in 1974. Perhaps buoyed with this success, he then proceeded to help form later the NZ Geophysics Society —recognising his becoming more of a geophysicist in recent years.

In 1961 Jim, like myself, joined the annual migration from sunny Hawkes Bay to begin university in Wellington helped by success in the nationwide scholarship examination. Jim immersed himself fully in the University life of the sixties and of course emerged with the accolade of 1st class honours in Mathematics in 1964. Always a rebel at heart (where are they now?) Jim identified with "seemingly lost" causes and provided a spark in many dark corners. I have vivid memories of the midnight motorbike journeys during holidays between Wellington and Hawkes Bay when we returned to then easily obtained vacation work in the factories and freezing works of Hawkes Bay! [I was always the pillion passenger on Jim's 500+cc motor-bicycle]. We used to always be going too fast! I can still hear his voice imploring me to "lean further" as we approached the next corner.

Another regular migration of those days (before high fees) was that of students to UK, and in 1965 Jim joined the merry band of NZers to study for his PhD in applied mathematics at Cambridge. It was there —not in shaky NZ! —that it was suggested that he study seismology. He is quoted in the VUW News of 2 August 1993 saying:

"It's a bit ironic that I was born in Napier and went to university in Wellington, yet the

impetus for me to get involved in earthquake research came from the people at Cambridge —they suggested it as an appropriate subject for my PhD thesis" he recalled later.

At Cambridge he tackled and solved a long-standing problem concerning the diffraction of seismic waves by Earth's core. Subsequently at Uppsala in Sweden he tested his theoretical solution against observations of seismic waves from earthquakes in Indonesia, and found substantial agreement.

Returning to Victoria University of Wellington, Jim Ansell lectured in mathematics but also became part the Institute of Geophysics. He was appointed Professor of Geophysics in 1989, and until late last year was also chairperson of the Research School of Earth Sciences.

Much of his research was focussed on the application of mathematical theory to the study of seismic wave propagation.

Other interests included earthquake hazard, the structure of the subducted plate under the eastern North Island, satellite measurement of the deformation of the Earth's surface by earthquakes, and wave propagation along the Tonga-Kermadec seismic zone.

Professor Walcott of Victoria University said the characteristic feature of Professor Ansell's personal research was the combination of theoretical and observational seismology with the continual testing of theory by observation.

"This has led to a much better knowledge of the subducted plate under the North Island of New Zealand that dominates our tectonic setting".

Jim was very active in organising joint research projects with overseas institutions, most recently the University of Leeds and Memphis University, and was to be an invited speaker at the 1993 Mathematics Colloquium —this being prevented by his untimely death.

Recently he had been working on arrangements for a meeting of the International Association of Seismology and Physics of the Earth Interior to be held at Victoria University next January.

Jim's contribution in research was equally matched by his enthusiastic approach to teaching, his ability to get students involved and interested in research, and for success in getting mathematics out of the textbook and into the real world. A steady stream of research students flowed into and out of his realm.

His interests included an intense involvement in the Labour Party fuelled of course by his instinctive sympathy for the underdog. He sought and failed, unfortunately for his likely constituents, the Labour nomination for the parliamentary seat of Napier over 10 years ago and was a key person in the Labour Party in the Island Bay electorate in which he lived. His loyalty was such that he kept up this involvement during the extremism introduced by Rogernomics in the last decade. Always a fervent debater, we all recall the late night debates, often by candlelight at his home.

Jim was always an optimist, a counter-example to the archetypal style of the introverted mathematician, who pursued relentlessly his ideal world and many impossible dreams. He is sorely missed by his colleagues and his large number of friends. The mathematical community has indeed lost one of its leading figures at the height of achievement in his career. He is survived by his wife Mary-Jane and three daughters, Rebecca, Emily and Kate, two of whom are currently students at Victoria University.

