

CENTREFOLD



A. Bruce Robson 1945-2000

It is with much sadness that we report the death of a friend and colleague, Dr Bruce Robson. Bruce died suddenly on the 25 of October 2000 aged only 55.

Bruce was a person with wide and passionate interests and was gifted with great insight into these interests. Applications of mathematics and statistics to biology, education in science, vintage cars, breeding dogs, or politics were just some of the interests and enthusiasms I knew about; Bruce had time for all. He was a most valuable colleague and friend whom we will now have to learn to do without.

Born in Auckland, his family moved to Christchurch as a very young child, and he lived in Christchurch all of his adult life. He was raised in a household of educators; both his father and mother were teachers. He was educated at Linwood North Primary, Linwood Intermediate School and Shirley Boys' High School. He then went on to do a Honours degree in science, majoring in Physics, at Canterbury University. By then he had developed a passion for research, and carried on to do a Masters degree in solid state physics. A two year stint of postgraduate research working with John Andreae on artificial intelligence then followed in the Electrical Engineering Department at Canterbury University, before he obtained a job as a Biometrician/Statistician at the Forestry Research Institute in Rangiora.

With his interests in computation, system design and programming he then worked as an Analyst Programmer, Systems Analyst and Electronic Data Processing Coordinator with Business Computers Ltd, Computer Bureau Canterbury Ltd and the Department of Health, respectively. This industry training equipped him well for the position of Lecturer in Statistics at the Lincoln University in the then Centre for Computing & Biometrics in 1982. The Centre for Computing has subsequently been subsumed into the Department of Applied Management & Computing Division and he became an Associate Professor there in 1999. The biological aspects of his previous employments had obviously had a part to play in his fervour for biological problems when he enrolled to do a staff PhD on mathematical modelling in Animal Science with Andrew Sykes. He obtained his PhD in 1992 with his submitted thesis titled Magnesium in Sheep Metabolism.

His research was applied in nature, covering a wide range of interdisciplinary areas with the focus on the mathematical modelling of natural systems. He developed a strong interest in physiology and developed a fine ability to express physiological processes in a mathematical form. He was working towards the development of a monitoring package for on-farm use which would indicate the magnesium status of individual cows. This would allow predictions through a computational model of any magnesium insufficiency and provide the signal to deliver mineral supplements to the cow's diet. His interests in mineral metabolism was extended in recent years with his interests in calcium signaling processes, in particular for corticotroph cells of the pituitary gland.

He was a supervisor, or associate supervisor, for five PhD students and one Masters student, mainly in topics of mathematical biology, but also financial mathematics. He left one PhD student and one Masters student still to complete.

After an early publication during his postgraduate period in electrical engineering Bruce's major publications appeared from 1990 with over twenty refereed publications in biological statistics and mathematical biology. His coauthors in the mathematical world for his work on cell modelling and population dynamics include Nigel Barlow, Andrew LeBeau, Alan McKinnon, Paul Shorten, James Sneyd, David Wall and Marijcke Vlieg-Hulstman. His co-authors for his work on magnesium metabolism modelling included D.E. Dalley, A.R. Isherwood, and Andrew Sykes, among others.

Bruce felt strongly about science and mathematics and their importance in education. This led to his extensive involvement with Science Alive, as a trustee, and with The National Roadshow Trust representing the Royal Society of New Zealand. He was earnest about the role of the university as being a place where people should receive a genuine education preferably in a broad range of disciplines. Bruce's skills did not stop at scientific research, and his other activities at Lincoln were consistent with his wide interests. He held many posts in Lincoln University committees, including President of the Association of University Teachers (Lincoln Branch) as it was then called, involvement in the Lincoln Music Society, membership of the Committee responsible for purchasing and displaying original art works around the university. Latterly he was a staff representative on the University Council at Lincoln. He was also a member of The New Zealand Mathematical Society, ANZIAM, The New Zealand Statistical Society and the The Royal Society of New Zealand.

Bruce's interests in motor sports are well known amongst his colleagues; he obtained a Canterbury University Blue for this in 1972, and he carried on these interests in the restoration of and motoring in vintage cars for the rest of his life. He also was a dog breeding enthusiast.

One story highlights part of Bruce's multi-interest character particularly well. While he was in the employment of FRI, and also maintaining his research links with the Electrical Engineering Department, he could be a difficult man to find at either. One bright spark replaced Bruce's nameplate on his office with the title The Scarlet Pimpernel. The stories about Bruce's colourful character abound, and this will always ensure he remains close to our hearts.

He is survived by his wife Alyson Gardner.

The University of Lincoln has established a scholarship fund in commemoration of Bruce's contribution to the University, and donations can be made to the Scholarships Office, P O Box 84, Lincoln University.

David J.N. Wall