

Obituary



Photo courtesy of Bernard Braesch, service de la communication, ULP.

Guy Ourisson 1926–2006

Guy Ourisson, a former member of the editorial board of *Phytochemistry*, was born on March 26, 1926 in Boulogne-Billancourt and sadly passed away on November 3, 2006, in Strasbourg. After studies at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* and the *Agrégation* in physical sciences (1946–1950), he obtained two Ph.D. degrees, both in terpenoid chemistry, a field in which he retained his interest during his long and productive career. His first PhD was in 1952 at Harvard University with L.F. Fieser on the “Oxidation of Δ^7 -stenols/oxidative cleavage of tertiary alcohols” and the second one was in 1954 at the Sorbonne in Paris with G. Dupont on “Studies on rearrangements and stereochemistry in the longifolene series”. In 1955, at the age of 29 years, he was appointed professor at the University of Strasbourg, to which he remained faithful throughout his scientific career. In 1995, he became emeritus professor, but continued to share his knowledge and experience with enthusiasm until his untimely passing last November.

Guy Ourisson occupies a special place among organic chemists. From the beginning of his career, he embraced an inter-disciplinary approach to his science. This was be-

cause he was convinced that the solution to many problems was only possible by an inter-disciplinary approach, and he effectively merged the disciplines of chemistry, biology and geology to address problems of compelling interest to him. Accordingly, starting from the chemistry of natural products (organic synthesis, structure determination, reaction mechanisms), he devised new approaches for the solution of biological problems (such as chemotaxonomy, biosynthetic pathways, dermatochemistry, neurochemistry, molecular evolution and prebiotic life chemistry), as well as related geological processes (e.g. organic geochemistry of biomarkers). He had a rich and diverse scientific output, with more than 400 publications, 25 review articles and about 20 essays, among them many gems: cycloartenol as the sterol precursor in plants, triterpenoids of the hopane series as molecular fossils and biomarkers of an overlooked class of bacterial lipids, molecular evolution of biomembranes and prebiotic chemistry of isoprenoids, to name but a few. In nearly fifty years of activity, he trained more than one hundred Ph.D. students and welcomed to his laboratory some 180 post-doctorals/visiting scientists, with

these representing about forty nationalities and who subsequently spread the influence of his school throughout the world.

It is not surprising that his scientific activity was to be recognized by many honours and 25 scientific prizes from French and foreign institutions. He was doctor *honoris causa* of the *Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule* in Zurich, professor *honoris causa* of the Shanghai Institute of Organic Chemistry, and a member of the Académie des Sciences (France), Academia Leopoldina (Germany), Academia Europaea and the European Academy of Arts, Sciences and Humanities. He was also a foreign or corresponding member of the Academies of Sweden, Denmark, India, Luxembourg, Serbia, Rheinland-Westphalia and the American Academy of Arts and Science, as well as being a honorary member of the chemical societies of Belgium, Switzerland, United Kingdom and Bulgaria. He also established collaborative educational research programs between the Université Louis Pasteur and many Japanese universities. A decoration (The Second Order of Merit) was conferred by the Japanese Government on him in recognition of his many distinguished services.

Guy Ourisson displayed an inexhaustible energy. The list of responsibilities he assumed is too long to be cited in its entirety. In 1959 he founded the *Groupe d'Etudes de Chimie Organique* (GECO) on the model of the Gordon Conferences. He also established the *Fondation Nationale Alfred Kastler* in order to improve the welcome of foreign researchers to France and was its president. In addition to being on the *Phytochemistry* Editorial Board, he was also regional editor for *Tetrahedron Letters* and dealt with more than 10,000 edited manuscripts. From 1955 until his death, he was consultant for many French and foreign companies (Organon, UGINE-Kuhlmann, Roure-Bertrand, Hoffmann – La Roche, Elf, Merrel-Dow Synthelabo, Transgene, Institut Français du Pétrole, Rhône-Poulenc, Compagnie Générale des Eaux and Vivendi). In 1971, he was also one of the first founders of the Université Louis Pasteur in Strasbourg

and its first president. From 1981 to 1982, he assumed the responsibilities of *Directeur Général des Enseignements Supérieurs* at the Ministry of Education. From 1985 to 1989, he succeeded Sir Derek H.R. Barton as a director of the *Institut de Chimie des Substances Naturelles* (CNRS, Gif-sur-Yvette). Finally, he was elected vice-president of the French Académie des Sciences (1998–1999) and was president from 2000 to 2001.

He had a very rich life, and frequently visited the orient where he appreciated the traditional cultures there. In particular, he enjoyed Kabuki, Awa-dance, and at Tokushima (2 times!) enthralled us with his skills in Japanese professional dance. A great number of his unforgettable and often humorous performances remain in our hearts very much. He also loved the local natural wonders (the hot springs, the flora and collection of mushrooms), as well as the local foodstuffs, puffer fish!!!, dried cuttlefish and shabu-shabu. Often, he enjoyed having his shoulders massaged by one of us, Yoshi Asakawa.

To be useful to others was a leitmotiv of his whole life. This ensured him the respect, admiration and friendship of all those who met him.

Michel Rohmer

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