

Obituary



WILLIAM ALFRED AYER
[1932–2005]

On December 2, 2005 William Alfred (Bill) Ayer passed away at the age of 73 suddenly but peacefully. He will be remembered through his love and enthusiasm for chemistry, his kind manners, and his joy and genuine caring for everybody. He was remembered with great affection at the 2006 Annual Meeting of the Phytochemical Society of North America, held in Oxford, Mississippi.

Bill Ayer was born on July 4, 1932 in Middle Sackville, New Brunswick. He obtained his B.Sc. (Honors) from the University of New Brunswick in 1953 receiving the Governor General's Gold Medal as the top graduate. He continued his studies at the University of New Brunswick under W. I. Taylor and obtained his Ph.D. in 1956 with a thesis entitled "Synthesis of Carrisone". He was also involved in the seminal contributions in Professor R.W. Woodward's group at Harvard University on chlorophyll *a* total synthesis. Following this, William Alfred Ayer, FCIC, FRSC, went on to become a Assistant Professor in 1958, Professor in 1967, and University Professor in 1992, at the University of Alberta.

Those of us who new Bill Ayer were impressed by his kind and joyful approach to investigate a very eclectic mixture of natural products chemistry. However, he will be best known perhaps for two broad themes, the lycopodium alkaloids and the metabolites of the birds' nest fungi. Over a long and pro-

ductive research career, his team tackled a variety of problems that Bill used to bring to the laboratory always with great ease and genuine curiosity. In his choice of themes and projects, his great sense of humor was always evident, whether he was aiming at making a molecule, determining its biological activity or discovering new bioactive metabolites. An infectious enthusiasm was one of his great strengths and that made him capable of inspiring his group members to be curious and become successful researchers.

When Bill started graduate school at the University of New Brunswick in 1953, NMR was not a routine tool and natural product structure determination was a very elaborate and lengthy process, often requiring a team approach. Bill Ayer was then part of the Team that elucidated the structure of the lycopodium alkaloid annotinine. As natural products chemistry evolved over the decades spanning of his career, so did Bill's projects. He adapted and became a pioneer on the search for biologically active fungal metabolites that might be involved in causing plant disease symptoms. Not surprisingly to those who new him, among the multiple qualities of Bill as a scientist, were being a good listener and cultivating great professional relationships with biologists, including plant pathologists. For example, the study of the "black gall effect" of aspen, demonstrates how his team and collaborators applied natural

products chemistry to provide solutions to a problem in the forestry area (*Can. J. Chem.*, 1995, 73, 465–470).

For his scientific achievements Professor Ayer received multiple awards, one of the most recent being the E. W. R. Steacie Award from the Canadian Society for Chemistry and many others, as reported in a short biography in the issue of the *Canadian Journal of Chemistry* in his honor (*Can. J. Chem.*, 1997, 75, v–vii). In addition, his contributions to the profession in Canada were recognized with the award of the Montreal Medal of the Chemical Institute of Canada at the Canadian Society for Chemistry Conference in June 1997.

The natural products chemistry community lost a great member but Bill's contributions will remain forever and so will he in our memories.

M. Soledade C. Pedras

University of Saskatchewan, Department of Chemistry

110 Science Place, Saskatoon, Canada SK S7N 5C9

Tel.: +1 306 966 4772; fax: +1 306 966 4730

E-mail address: pedras@sask.usask.ca

Available online 17 May 2007