

Remembering Professor Colin Brown



Professor Colin Brown

It is with great sadness that we report the passing of Professor Emeritus Colin Brown, who died on November 13, 2013. He was a teacher who cared deeply about others, and a life-long learner. Brown always enjoyed a lively discussion, not just for arguments' sake, but to make sure that the facts aligned and logic hung together.

Colin Brown was born and raised in England. At the end of World War II, after a brief and unenthusiastic spell in the British army, he returned to

London to earn a Bachelor's degree from King's College, where he studied engineering, theology and philosophy; a combination that seemed to him unremarkable. Brown married in 1954, and he and his wife Irene moved to British Columbia where he designed and built bridges in remote locations for the provincial government.

A chance encounter in Victoria B.C., and the Russian Sputnik launch influenced Brown to pursue his PhD at the University of Minnesota. He received a doctorate in Aeronautical Engineering under Larry Goodman and accepted an academic position in Berkeley, where his daughters were born. Brown was caught up in the technical and social revolutions of the early '60s. During this time he met Ian Munro, on leave from Imperial College, who remained a close intellectual ally until Munro's untimely death. The pair stumbled into a lecture by Lofteh Zadeh on fuzzy sets and both recognized how this logic might address uncertainties in engineering systems in a new way that they found sorely lacking in the analyses of the time.

A stint at Columbia furthered Brown's interests in mechanics, with Raymond D. Mindlin, and safety, with Alfred M. Freudenthal. Leaving Columbia, he succumbed to temptation in the form of Jim Evans' invitation to move to Seattle. Brown served for 25 years on the faculty in Civil Engineering; as a faculty member, Department Chair and Chair of the Faculty Senate at the University of

Washington. During professional leave spent at Imperial College in London and in Christchurch, New Zealand, he pursued an ongoing fascination with systems engineering and uncertainty alongside Ian Munro and newfound colleagues Paul Jowitt, David Blockley and David Elms. After retiring in 1994, Brown and his wife settled in Corvallis, Oregon.

Brown's work has been published in journals of mechanical engineering, geotechnical engineering, systems and astronomical mechanics. During the past year (2013) he was in discussion with a professor in Colombia regarding the absence of early stone bridges in South America. He also co-wrote an article about online learning with a colleague in the U.S.

He read everything, forgot nothing and had a habit of having just read the definitive work on a subject on which you thought (incorrectly) that you were an expert.

His intellectual interests were dizzyingly broad. Brown affected everyone he met, actively maintaining countless friendships throughout life. Friends say that he read everything, forgot nothing and had a habit of having just read the definitive work on a subject on which you thought (incorrectly) that you were an expert. His style was sometimes contradictory, mostly understated and often humorous. While he agreed that 'brevity is the soul of wit', Brown, nonetheless, seemed to prefer an indirect approach. He took pleasure in a paper that deduced the social arrangements in ancient Egypt solely from the change in slope in the Bent Pyramid. And, as his students soon learned, the casual remark "there is a book . . ." really meant, "Go and read it!"

Colin is survived by Irene, his wife of almost 60 years, his two daughters, and his grandchildren. All those who had the pleasure of knowing him, admiring him or calling him their mentor will feel the force of Colin Brown's personality for many years to come. ■