

Aylward Ernest Richardson Downe (1928-2002)

Excellence is a rarely achieved goal, which many of us strive for in our lives, and when achieved, it usually pertains to a highly specialized skill or narrow area or expertise. True excellence, however, the kind that raises the standards of performance not for one, but for many, can only be embodied. Excellence of this kind figures frequently in reveries, rarely in reality. Al Downe was one of the few who embodied excellence in his life, his work and his leisure. He blazoned a trail for many young academics, and stood as an example to them.



Born in 1928, Al had a spotty high school career, but this was a momentary blip on his academic record, for while working on oil rigs in northern Alberta, he became fascinated by the fossils of invertebrate organisms that he encountered on the drilling sites. This fascination led him back into the academic stream, and he completed a BSc in entomology at the University of Alberta in 1952. By invitation, he then pursued an MA in Biology at Queen's University under A. S. West's tutelage, receiving that degree in 1954. After working as a research officer with the federal Department of Agriculture, he returned to Queen's University and Professor West's lab to embark on a PhD program, which he finished in 1961. For the first three years of his professional career, Al was an assistant professor at Kansas State University, then an associate professor at the University of Saskatchewan in Regina. In 1967, he once more moved to Queen's University, this time to stay till his retirement in 1993. He was promoted to professor in 1970 and served as department head from 1977 till 1980. His stellar career at Queen's did not go unnoticed: he was elected a fellow of the Entomological Society of Canada and a member of the New York Academy of Science. However, the awards that meant most to him came from the Biology Department student body, which twice voted him their teacher of choice (1991 and 1993).

Al Downe's research was concerned primarily with haematophagous insects and the physiological mechanisms of reproduction, insecticide resistance, immuno-chemistry and recently also recombinant DNA techniques. In 1989, Queen's University received three million dollars from a Centre of Excellence grant to apply advanced biotechnology to insect pest management. Al was one of the principle investigators of this project with Bill Bendena, Virginia Walker and Gerry Wyatt from the Biology Department, and Eric Carstens and Peter Faulkner from Microbiology and Immunology. During his tenure at Queen's, Al took two sabbatical leaves, both to work with Lewis Davies at the University of Durham, an association he frequently referred to as significant for his career. Saying that Al published close to 200 peer-reviewed scientific publications, taught thousands of undergraduates, and successfully supervised over three dozen graduate students maybe a valid summary of this man's career output, but it does not do justice to the breadth and depth of this person, or the impact he made on our lives.

Al was a fine colleague. One could count on getting valuable advice from him, partly because he was a master at phrasing criticism in a way, which made it easier to swallow. However, he did not suffer pomp or false dignity easily, and was known to be able to hit upon the perfect put down for any occasion. I will always remember him for his obvious enjoyment of life. Humour was a big part of Al; even when later in his life he was not well physically. The last time I talked with him, an obvious touch of cynicism had crept into his humour, but humour it was. I miss his laughter. I miss him. Al is survived by his wife Evelyn, his daughters Kathryn and Pamela, and his son Alan.

- Dolf Harmsen, Kingston, Ont.