

After Dinner Speech

Wolfgang Rindler

Dear Friends,

Please forgive me if I'm disturbing the rest of your dinner, but time is of the essence – as Einstein himself might well have said.

We, here at UTD and previously at SCAS have been singularly fortunate to have had a personage of the caliber of Ivor Robinson on board – “on board” is actually too weak a term, much of the time he steered the ship!

Ivor's interest in relativity began early with such semi-popular books as those by Jeans and Eddington, and intensified at Cambridge where he thoroughly but privately studied Peter Bergmann's well known text “Introduction to Relativity”, while otherwise concentrating on pure mathematics. In later life Ivor read very few technical books in detail – preferring by far the conversational mode of acquiring information, and, if necessary, rediscovering for himself whatever results he needed. This is in marked contrast to his way with history, politics, and Judaism – in all of which he was a voracious reader of vast and subtle culture. Helped by an impeccable memory, and supremely at ease with language, he would gladly and passionately defend his strongly held views. Never quite without irony, and a distinctly mocking wit, savoring his words like good wine, he loved to develop an intricate story or argument. In short, he was consummately verbal. No one who has heard Ivor talk will ever forget his inimitable style, his intensity and restlessness, his sonorous voice, his undiluted English accent, his brilliance, his natural dominance of any conversation.

Ivor was instrumental in the foundation of SCAS in 1963, where SCAS stands for Southwest Center for Advanced Studies – in deliberate echo of the Princeton Institute. The very far-sighted city fathers of Dallas had decided that every civilized city needs a center of higher research, which would give it not only prestige, but also attract scientific companies to settle in Dallas and thus fertilize its commercial climate.

The basic money came from the three founders of TI (Texas Instruments) Cecil Green, Eugene McDermott, and Eric Jonsson, the latter also being mayor of Dallas at the time. The Center was to have four divisions: Geosciences, Space Sciences, Molecular Biology, and Relativity. Ivor was to head the Relativity division. The reasoning behind choosing these four areas of study was not random: The great new ideas of plate tectonics had just transformed and energized the entire field of geosciences (and, besides, the seismic component of geosciences was of permanent interest to the Texas Oil Industry). Molecular Biology was a fascinating and infinitely promising new field, triggered by the recent discovery of DNA. Space Science was stimulated by a whole slew of Wernher von Braun's Rockets brought back from Germany to this country by the returning army, and just waiting to be used for civilized purposes. And General Relativity had undergone an incredible renaissance in the late 1950's and early sixties. It had lain dormant for forty years, distantly respected for its difficult mathematics but regarded as largely irrelevant. Nevertheless in 1955 there were commemorative meetings all over the world celebrating 50 years of special and 40 years of general relativity. And suddenly people in the field realized that there were other rather clever people all over the world who had been working away quietly producing extraordinarily beautiful results. A flurry of activity followed.

And the cognoscenti knew that Ivor Robinson was one of the big players. He had obtained his Bachelor's Degree in Cambridge and then found a comfortable job at the University of Wales, without ever bothering about a PhD. The elegant thing in those days was to be able to put after your name "B.A.Cantab., FRS". FRS means Fellow of the Royal Society, and is hugely prestigious, but also hugely hard to get. Ivor should certainly have gotten it, but he was too nonchalant to canvass for it. For years he did not even publish his beautiful results. He preferred to talk about them to friends, travel the world, talk at conferences, privately know his worth, until finally in 1959, after one of those conferences, Leopold Infeld of Warsaw practically forced him to publish. And the rest is history. So a Division of Relativity at SCAS and Ivor as its head made perfect sense! He invited Pista Oszvath and me to join him. The three of us were the permanent faculty of the division. But one of the beautiful things about SCAS was its largesse. Ivor was able to invite well-known relativists from all over the world to spend time with us at the Center, sometimes for weeks, or months, or even half-years. He brought Infeld, Trautman, Plebanski from Warsaw, Lichnerovicz from Paris, Michel Cahen from Brussels, Yuval Ne'eman from Israel, Jürgen Ehlers, Manfred Trümper, Klaus Bichteler from Germany, Roger Penrose from Oxford, Schücking and Kerr from Germany and New Zealand (via UTAustin), and many more. Consequently much of our time was spent in lively conversations, collaborations, seminars, and publications, including by the reluctant Ivor. Ivor loved to tell friends vigorously of his findings, preferably at the blackboard, discuss them in detail, and then have the friend write them up, possibly as co-author.

But it wasn't all work and no play. There were memorable parties in the evenings. They were always enlivened by Ivor's conversation, always ironic, always witty, about politicians, administrators, fake scientists, colleagues with errant political views. On the lighter side, Lichnerovicz had brought his guitar with him from Paris, and entertained us with slightly risqué' (and sometimes very risqué') French songs. The funny thing was that Lichnerovicz was a devout Catholic who went to mass every morning at 6! Then there were expeditions into the countryside. A group of us developed a habit of going horseback riding along the bridle paths along Lake Grapevine. For several years we did this almost every Sunday, renting horses for an amazing \$2 an hour!! Ivor was a very enthusiastic member of that group. Whatever he may have lacked in style, he made up with tremendous gusto and speed. It's funny that two of the people (Wolfgang Kundt and Cecile de Witt) who sent in their reminiscences mentioned riding with Ivor!

All that enchanted life fizzled out around 1969, when SCAS ran out of money! We were taken over by the University of Texas System as the nucleus of an ambitious new University of Texas at Dallas. Overnight we were all University Professors, though much of our old SCAS camaraderie continued for a while. Look at us today: We have a thriving research university, a large and beautiful campus, 26,000 students, and distinguished research areas covering the whole gamut of disciplines from mathematics to business to brain science. We even have a famous champion chess team! Ivor turned out to have great administrative talents in the transition, and became Master of one of the colleges, and Head of Mathematics. I wish he could walk around the campus today and savor something of what he helped to create. He will certainly be never forgotten, neither here nor in the scientific world at large, where he is firmly inscribed among the greats.