

KEITH FRANKLIN

George Andrew Ferguson
1914-2002



McGill Professor Emeritus and Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, George Andrew Ferguson died in Edinburgh, Scotland on December 26, 2002, as a result of injuries he suffered in a fall.

Professor Ferguson was born July 23, 1914 in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia and grew up on a farm in Pictou County. He was a graduate of Dalhousie University, taking a BA with great distinction in Latin and Classical Philosophy in 1936. He then moved to the University of Edinburgh. He took a Masters in Education in 1938, and received his doctorate in Psychology in 1940. He served in the Canadian army in World War II, and was discharged with the rank of Major in 1945. After the war he entered business as an industrial consulting psychologist, but moved to McGill and academic life in 1947.

His commitment to academic life and McGill was evident early on. He began academic life as an assistant professor, needless to say, at a much lower salary than he could obtain in industry. He continued to be sought by industry and by other institutions and the University responded by rapidly promoting him associate professor 1948 and full professor in 1949. He played an important role in the development of the Psychology Department at McGill. He served as Chairman of Psychology from 1964 to 1975, and Vice-Dean, Biological Sciences 1966-1971.

Professor Ferguson's special expertise was in statistics, and the quantitative assessment of human abilities. He is best known for his remarkably successful textbook "Statistical Analysis in Psychology and Education", first published by McGraw Hill in 1959. The textbook became one of the standard texts. It was used all over the world and ran through 5 editions over 22 years. The last edition was published in the year of his elevation to the rank of Professor Emeritus in 1981. A sixth edition, in collaboration with his younger colleague, Dr Yoshio Takane, appeared in 1989.

George Ferguson's expertise on the nature of human intelligence and learning was widely recognized, and he served in many organizations concerned with human resources and training. These included the Human Resources Advisory committee of the Defence Research Board, the Psychology panel of the National Research Council, the Committee on Mental Health Research, and the Department of Health and Welfare. He was a consultant to UNESCO in 1954 and 1955. In 1955-56 he was elected President of the Canadian Psychological Association, and at the same time was Treasurer of the International Congress of Psychology. He served as Member of the Quebec Commission on Higher Education from 1964 to 1967.

Professor Ferguson received many honours. In 1962 he was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. He won a Canada Centennial Medal in 1967, was made honorary Doctor of Science by Memorial University in 1975. He received a Queen Elizabeth II, Silver Jubilee Medal in 1977.

The consultancy with UNESCO in 1954-55 was in Paris, and this year in Paris turned out to be a very significant event in his life. George's first marriage to Michelle Grinion, had ended in divorce. In Paris he met Rowena Sheldon, an American from Rhode Island who was also working with UNESCO. She became his second wife and companion for many years. Rowena was a vivacious, witty and charming woman and many of George's colleagues came to know her well. They loved to entertain. Their dinner parties at their country cottage in Vermont were memorable occasions, and professors old enough to have participated in them still recollect them

with great pleasure. Sadly, after some 20 years with George, Rowena became ill, and died in 1984 when she was only 73. The later years of his life were shared with his long-time friend and companion Margaret Howard, who also became a friend to many of his colleagues. George had two daughters, Claudia and Leith from his first marriage, and in later years he spent a lot of time with Claudia, whose superb cooking he greatly appreciated. It was on a visit with Claudia that he suffered the unfortunate accident that led to his death.

George Ferguson was known to his colleagues not only as a statistician and a teacher. He was also a remarkable personality, a lover of art and literature, and a poet. His poetry could be whimsical, sensual or serious. Memories of his early life in Nova Scotia and his grandfather, Alfred Denistoun had a great influence on him. Though his professional life took him far from the farm and from Nova Scotia, the fierce, independent, Protestant spirit of Pictou County was deeply embedded in his view of the world, and this philosophy was expressed in some of his poetry. He also wrote whimsical poems on aspects of academic life. Readings of this poetry were a feature of Psychology Department parties for many years, and his convocation address, on the occasion of becoming Professor Emeritus, may be the only one in the archives of the Faculty of Science which featured original poems. A poem about George written by one of his colleagues and read at his memorial service will perhaps convey a flavour of this remarkable man.

G. A. F

I knew a statistician once.
Probably a stoop shouldered man,
Myopic perhaps, through thick lenses
Grinding out the crabbed script of the 5th edition of
Statistics for Psychology and Education.
Five editions right enough - to tease the brains of countless undergraduates.
But, improbably, a large boned man
Craggy as the rocks of Nova Scotia whence he came.
A voice gravelled as its fog traced, storm washed beaches.

Paint and poetry factored the analysis of his variance.
A lover of wine and women - though I never heard him sing -
Perhaps in the shower, a hymn, or a sea shanty - with rum in it somewhere,
More befitting a god fearing pirate than a priest.

Now he is gone what epitaph can I find?
What abstract of a life for remembering friends?
No muse descends to help, but borrowed words may serve.
He was a man, take him for all in all.
I shall not look upon his like again.

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(Author's title given as of the time of writing)