

CHRISTOPHER HELLEINER

John A. McCarter
1918-2005



J.A. McCarter (Alec to everyone), one of Canada's most distinguished senior biochemists, died in Victoria on February 14, 2005. Alec was born in 1918 in the Yukon gold rush town of Dawson City. He sometimes reminisced about playing street hockey there with Pierre Berton, and showed us a large gold nugget he had inherited from his grandfather. His undergraduate degree in Chemistry and Biochemistry was from the University of British Columbia. His enduring interest in carcinogenesis probably had its beginning when he worked on secret defence research projects during World War II at the University of Toronto, where he obtained his Ph.D. He then went on to continue similar work at Chalk River. His first academic appointment came in 1948, at the then tiny Department of Biochemistry at Dalhousie University. He succeeded Gordon Young as Department Head in 1950, only the second person to hold that position. Department Heads served for many years in those days - no rotating chairmanships.

Alec's influence on the development of the Department, the Faculty of Medicine and the university as a whole was profound. Dalhousie was a very small university in those days - "The Little College by the Sea", as it was described in the Calendar. Alec played an important part in bringing it into the twentieth century both academically and socially. He introduced graduate programmes and modern research in a very modest physical plant. A number of senior people in the Faculty of Medicine, including Alec, formed the Izaak Walton Fishing Club. It was said that many important decisions taken by the Faculty had their beginnings during their annual trip each May to their "camp" in remote Guysborough County. Alec's was the voice of basic science; he laid the foundation for the explosive increase in the preclinical departments at Dalhousie just after he left. Among his other avocations, he became a keen birder. (That was how I first got to know him, watching the Caspian Terns on Georgian Bay at Honey Harbour during a National Cancer Institute conference there).

Alec's continuing work on skin carcinogenesis, using a colony of inbred mice which he skillfully maintained under rather difficult conditions resulted in his election to the Royal Society of Canada. At the same time he served a term as President of the Canadian Biochemical Society and was a member of the group of medical researchers who pioneered the transition of the Division of Medical Research of the National Research Council into the Medical Research Council.

Alec left Dalhousie in 1965 to become the Director of the National Cancer Institute Cancer Research Laboratory at the University of Western Ontario. His interests broadened to include the burgeoning field of RNA tumour virus research. In 1980 he moved again, to the University of Victoria. There he was able to combine his biochemical research with his enthusiasm for fishing. Trout he caught in streams on Vancouver Island were analyzed for their metallothionein as an indicator of heavy metal pollution of the water in which they lived. He retired in 1983.

Alec had contracted polio as a child; he always walked with a pronounced limp, and several times suffered fractures after falling. His condition worsened as he developed post-polio syndrome, and in his last years he was able to navigate only with a walker; he refused to resort to a wheel chair. He took up painting, and became a skilled amateur artist. He and his wife, Peggy developed an exceptionally fine flower garden at their house in Victoria, the uniquely favourable climate playing on their side. Alec contributed many thoughtful and evocative pieces to the Newsletter of the Victoria Rhododendron Society and the Finnerty Gardens Letter.

Alec's long career spanned the period during which biochemists put the finishing touches on our understanding of metabolic pathways and moved on to the study of genetic mechanisms and control networks. He kept up to date in his field, moving with the times both as a scientist and as an administrator. His gentle persuasiveness concealed a stubborn determination to keep Canadian science moving forward, taking its rightful place on the world stage.

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