

Obituary

Memories of Bob Boutilier

Robert Graeme Boutilier, Bob or “Boots” to many, and Bobby to his family was born on 8 September 1953, a few months over 50 years ago in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Growing up, his older sister Brenda always called him “my big little brother”. He went to high school in Halifax and completed his first year of university there at Dalhousie, an institution where he would later become professor and Department Head. As a first year student, he also started a rock band, being a talented musician. After the first year, his parents moved 100 km across the province to Wolfville, where his father retired and Bob enrolled at Acadia University. I first met Bob in 1971, when I was giving back midterm examinations in my first class at Acadia. After trying to correctly pronounce the student’s French names, including ‘Robert Boutilier’, with my Alberta accent, there was one lad near the front who, at the end of class, raised his hand and said politely “Sir, you don’t have an exam for a Bobby ‘Bootleer’ do you?”.

Although he initially wanted to be a dentist, he developed a fascination for toads and things amphibian and, during his penultimate undergraduate year, did a fine study looking at the respiratory physiology of toads during progressive hypoxia. I thought the work was publishable and Bob asked what the best journal was for submission. My answer was of course *The Journal of Experimental Biology* but suggested he send it elsewhere as he would not want his first paper rejected. Bob, being incredibly determined, wrote it up and submitted it to the *JEB* and, of course, it was accepted. From day one, he loved that Journal and, as we know, several years ago he became its editor and it became a major part of his life. The 12 primary publications that arose from his Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees at Acadia illustrate another talent that always stood him in good stead. As a “first draft–final draft” writer, his sentences in publications and his spoken words in class and at conferences were always crystal clear, lacking excessive verbosity.

A side of Bob that many did not know is that he loved to play golf, and his finesse around the greens was at “pro” level. On his 35th birthday, he shot his age on the first nine at a difficult Nova Scotia course. He went on to complete the game at 1 over par, 71. As a Master’s student at Acadia, his quick reflexes and adept hand–eye coordination moved him to number 2 on the Biology squash ladder. He never beat his

supervisor, but perhaps there was some of the Boutilier political astuteness involved in that.

Bob and I used to love telling stories about each other, and when in public, or with students, we had an agreement that we would not correct each other, and indeed, some of the tales, especially Bob’s, became warmly embellished. It is true, however, that in his early scientific career Bob followed what we affectionately call the reverse Krogh principle to facilitate his travels around the world. His most favourite axiom was “never choose an experimental animal that is only found in Cleveland, Ohio”. His science was uniquely inventive. While working on land crabs in Tahiti, he and Chris Wood wanted to exercise the crabs but lacked a treadmill. Not to be deterred, Bob bought a variable-speed belt sander at a local store, turned it upside down and it became part of a unique series of experiments on crab exercise. His science became more cellular and biochemical in later years but he was always interested in the whole animal and how each small piece fit into the big picture.

Bob, though kind, usually quiet and gentle, was fiercely independent, and this at times complicated his life. We laughed many times about how as a Master’s student in 1976 I took him to some international meetings in Paris. As his supervisor, I offered to order his breakfast from a cranky French waiter. “Of course not”, was his retort, “I can speak French”, which he then tried to do. The waiter snuffled appropriately and asked Bob “Would you like to try English, Monsieur; you have just ordered a fried pencil”.

Bob loved his parents and family dearly, coming back to Nova Scotia at least twice a year to visit. Although his mother, Anne, at 93 probably does not fully understand what happened in December, she loved her Bobby dearly and was extremely proud that he was, to use her words, a “Cambridge professor”.

A myriad of Bob Boutilier stories abound around the world. I know of very few people who are fortunate enough to receive that unique combination of love and respect. He was simply fun to be around. His presence and warm smile made a room come to life. He loved his students and defended them fiercely should anyone say an unkind word about them. To him, science, the journal and teaching were simply “fun”. He relished having good times as well. His family in England was his dear Sidney Sussex College, where he delighted in the

Fellowship, as well as Margaret Clements and many others in the JEB office.

He spent New Years Eve with my family in rural Nova Scotia every year and waited for midnight when tradition granted that he could shoot the 12-gauge shotgun off the deck. He confessed to his friends in Cambridge that one year he just missed a cow in the field next door, but in fact it was only the neighbour's house, whose occupants eventually got used to our

midnight antics. His last words to me, which he wrote on a clipboard on 13 December, when I saw him last, were "Shoot one off the deck for me, Dan; I probably won't make it this year". Sadly, he did not make it. We will all miss him immensely, but the science and stories will live on, as he does, in our hearts and memories.

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