

Obituary

DR SIMON WOLFF

Simon Wolff died suddenly, shockingly, at home in the early afternoon of November 25, 1995. Complications associated with a respiratory tract infection seem to have been the most likely cause. He was 38 years old. Simon is survived by his wife, Lindis Hallan, and two children, Anja Kristin Marie and Paul Mattias Henrik, aged 3 years and 7 months, respectively, at the time of their father's death. Simon is buried in Highgate Cemetery, London – 'to the left of Karl Marx,' says Lindis.

Simon's loss has caused grief in the free radical community. Many people have shared their anecdotes about him, often concerning the first time that they met Simon. In the case of Nick Hunt, it was after giving a seminar at Brunel University in late 1984. Afterwards, Simon confided (over a pint of beer, naturally) that he 'smelt a rat' because the data had been too 'smooth' – and then proceeded to find a loose end and painfully (for the speaker) unravel it over the next half hour. John Eaton was introduced to Simon at the 1985 Gordon Conference. After an exposition by John on the topic of why 'the lens is canned' (a preoccupation at that time), Simon's response was 'John, I think that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard'. And so were born two decade-long friendships.

Simon was a very, very talented person and a polymath. The latter is not a particularly useful survival skill in an academic era when narrow specialisation is the norm. His first two published articles were on aldose reductase, but his next was on Formative Causation. Subsequently he published a number of good papers on the relationships between diabetes, sugar oxidation and cataract formation. He also developed a new method (since commercialized) for measurement of hydroperoxides in biological samples and pointed out the potential hazards of using aminoguanidine as a prophylactic drug in diabetes. Lipid oxidation and atherosclerosis was another

recent theme. At the same time, he maintained a steady output of opinion pieces on a broad range of topics, from the problems faced by British universities, to urban transport policy, to peer review, to environmental health. He was a frequent correspondent to 'Nature' and reviewer for that journal. He was an effortlessly good writer and all-round communicator – and any newspaper headline writer would have been proud of the titles of some of his short articles: 'How to win funds and influence people'; 'Academica Cosa Nostra'; 'Benzene on wheels'; 'Publish and be praised'.

Simon was a university lecturer and was rated very favourably for his teaching by his students at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. He also was a member of some important British committees, including the Research Advisory Panel of the charity 'Research into Aging' and the 'Research for Health Charities Group'. He was a member of the editorial advisory panel of the Biochemical Journal.

Simon possessed that rather unfashionable commodity – a social conscience. His distaste for the current state of political ideology in Britain was well known. This awareness of the social context of scientific activity led Simon to apply his training to problems related to the environment, in particular the pollution and health hazards caused by motor vehicles. He was a leading figure in the (ultimately successful) battle to prevent the construction of a motorway through the Archway district of London. This led him to further question the unthinking policy of building more and more roads, thereby creating more and more traffic and pollution. In 1994 he appeared before the British House of Commons Transport Committee and convinced it that unleaded petrol was not the clean, 'green' fuel that it was purported to be. This exemplified Simon's considerable personal courage in defence of the truth as he saw it, as also did

the media brawl with the New Zealand Government that broke out during his visit there in 1994. His most recent preoccupation was with the possible link between leukaemia and environmental exposure to benzene from fuel. Given the obvious vested interests, this idea was extremely controversial. Just before his death, Simon had produced some *in vitro* experimental work which might provide a mechanism to explain the proposed association between benzene and leukaemia.

In 1993 Churchill Livingstone approached Simon with the idea of starting a new journal in the free radical field, and so Redox Report was born. He recruited the most boring and the most eccentric two people he could think of as co-Editors (the reader may judge which is which) and the first issue duly appeared in 1994. The one and only organic, as opposed to electronic, Editorial Board meeting of the journal took place in the sunshine of Darling Harbour, Sydney, during the Biennial ISFRR meeting there in 1994. Simon was the journal; he wrote the thoughtful and funny editorials, cajoled, annoyed, flattered and strong-armed people to get the thing on the road. He was inordinately proud of the progress that had been made in a short time. Redox Report was his third child.

Simon was no saint. His comments could be, in turn, unutterably charming or very cutting. Sometimes he was tremendous fun, sometimes irritating. He didn't bother to hide his disdain for science or people that he considered 'boring' (one of his favourite words), and this didn't endear him to the free radical Establishment. His internal contradictions were exemplified by his concern with Public Health issues whilst being a cigarette smoker. He had been known to have one or two more drinks than might have been advisable. His

family and friends have seen him hyperactive, or disaffected; bubbling, and morose; pragmatic, and idealistic; well-organised (his usual public face), or positively anarchic (in his private life). Simon was incredibly lucky to find in Lindis a partner who could handle things while he was on another planet, and periodically bring him down to earth. Just before he died, Simon was happier and more positive than we, his friends, could remember – professionally, but more especially because of his love for his family. Our thoughts are with Lindis, Anja and Paul Mattias.

Simon achieved a lot in his short life, but what might he have gone on to do in the next 30 years, years that he could reasonably have expected to enjoy? A character in 'L'Espoir,' by André Malraux, expressed the sense of stifled human potential like this: '*La tragedie de la mort est en ceci qu'elle transforme la vie en destin, qu'à partir d'elle rien ne peut plus être compensé*'. The free radical community is actively discussing a 'living memorial' to Simon. Redox Report will commemorate him by carrying the tribute 'Founding Editor, Simon Wolff' in perpetuity. There will be a memorial service for him in London early in 1996. Most of all, he will be in our memories, and in our hearts. For us, his epitaph will always be: '*He was never boring*'.

Nick Hunt and John Eaton

Simon Wolff. Born Harborough Magna, Warwickshire, England 3 March, 1957. Research Fellow, Brunel University, London and Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of Ophthalmology, Columbia University, New York 1984–86. Lecturer, then Senior Lecturer, University College Medical School, London 1986–95. Died London 25 November, 1995.

Members of the free radical community are planning to establish a 'living memorial' to Simon Wolff. It is likely to take the form of a student travel prize or award for an outstanding conference contribution; the final decision will be taken in consultation with his widow, Lindis Hallan. If any individuals or organisations wish to make a donation to a fund to support this initiative, could they forward them to either: Nicholas H. Hunt, Department of Pathology, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia or John W. Eaton, Division of Experimental Pathology, Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, The Albany Medical College, 47 New Scotland Avenue, Albany, NY 12208, USA. Contributions will be appropriately acknowledged.