

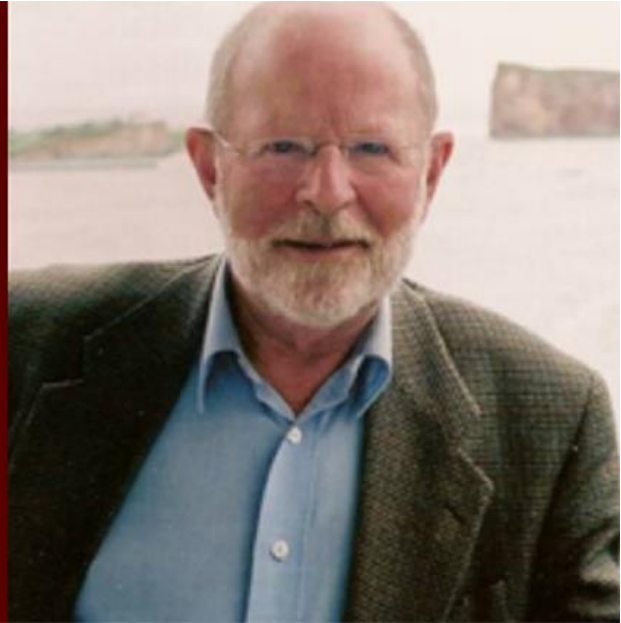
Gerald J.S. Wilde, Emeritus Professor

in the Department of Psychology,

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Dr. Gerald J.S. Wilde

Monday January 14, 2019

by Dr. Alistair MacLean

Gerald J.S. Wilde, Emeritus Professor in the Department of Psychology at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, died on 1st January 2019 in Oaxaca, Mexico at the age of 86.

Born into an academic family, Gerry grew up in the Netherlands and was 12 when the Canadian Army liberated his hometown. His war experiences were a major factor in later life. After military service as a conscript in the Dutch Army, he was admitted to his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees at the University of Amsterdam, the last in 1962. After holding academic positions at the Universities of Amsterdam, Utrecht and the City University of New York Gerry came to Queen's in 1965. Apart from academic leaves spent in France, the Netherlands, Australia, and Switzerland, he remained at Queen's until 1997 when he retired as Professor Emeritus.

Gerry had a wide range of intellectual interests that resulted in many publications including thirty-five book chapters, eighty journal articles, over one hundred conference papers, and fifty-eight technical reports. He was a sought-after speaker, nationally and internationally, and delivered more than one hundred and seventy colloquia, guest lectures, and conference addresses. His teaching covered the spectrum of psychometrics, personality theory, abnormal psychology, and social psychology. He was instrumental in introducing courses on human factors and ergonomics into the curriculum and supervised twenty-nine M.A. and Ph.D. dissertations as well as many undergraduate theses.

A major theme of Gerry's research was the applicability of psychology to everyday human issues. His early research included the psychometric approach to personality assessment, consumer behaviour, psychosomatic medicine, the heritability of individual differences, behaviour modification in the addictions, and sensory deprivation. In the late 1960s a major change in his interests emerged from an invitation to become a member of a scientific committee established by the Canadian Federal Government to examine road safety. Gerry found the issues raised presented a major intellectual challenge that was to guide his future research on the ergonomics of fitting the human environment to the capabilities and limitations of human performance. This included the study of traffic behaviour and the causes of accidents, of mass communication theory and its application to the alleviation of behavioural problems of societal concern, of job satisfaction, and of the effects of alcohol upon human performance.

Central to his later work is his study of risk taking and the Risk Homeostasis Theory, which he proposed in a paper published in 1982. Originally applied to the role of human behaviour in the causation of road accidents, the theory, later extended to other aspects of human behaviour, was described in several papers and two books subsequently translated into Spanish, Russian, Portuguese, Hebrew, and Japanese. The core of the theory is the assertion that peoples' behaviour depends on the level of risk they are prepared to tolerate. It follows that health and safety measures will only be effective if they motivate people to alter the amount of risk they are willing to incur. Thus technical improvements in vehicles, such as seat belts, will not result in reduced accidents because drivers, perceiving themselves to be safer, will increase their speed or follow other vehicles more closely.

The theory has attracted both strong supporters and unsympathetic critics. A Dutch researcher suggested that it should be renamed "Wilde's Law of the Conservation of Misery". Another described it as "a Freudian pseudo-scientific belief held by a Dutch-Calvinist preacher who is blazing the notion of a perverse death wish". (Coming from a Catholic background, Gerry was particularly amused by this.) The implication that improving the design of machines and the operating environment, and increasing the skill of human operators will not be effective unless the level of risk that people will tolerate is altered has attracted particular comment. One writer described the theory as "a frontal attack on the premise that the rate and severity of accidents can be reduced by improving the design of machines and environments". Supporters have described the work as "exemplary ... a focal point of debate", "a comprehensive theory about the psychological processes that underlie risky behaviour" and a "superlative achievement".

While not a lover of administration, Gerry gave generously of his time in service to the Department, Faculty, University and to his profession and was a member or chair of many influential committees. He successfully chaired the committee that introduced formal ethics procedures for research in the Department of Psychology, at that time a controversial issue, and later chaired the University Major Ethics Review Committee. He was a long-serving member of the Vice-Principal's Advisory Committee on Occupational and Environmental Health and of the University Council for the Canadian Institute for Guided Ground Transport and served on the University Senate. He contributed locally as a member of the Health Promotion Committee of the Kingston, Frontenac and Lennox and Addington District Health Council and as President of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies.

Gerry served on many committees related to transportation in both Canada and internationally including: the Research Correlation Committee of the Roads and Transportation Association of Canada; as Chair of the French Research Group on the Scientific Evaluation of Safety Campaigns; and was still serving on the Swedish International Committee on Alcohol, Drugs and Traffic Safety at the time of his death. He contributed to the organisation of conferences and symposia for many conferences and was a member of the editorial board of several journals.

Gerry's broad expertise led to many requests for his services as a consultant and he advised agencies, laboratories, and government departments on transportation safety in Canada, the United States, Sweden, Finland, The Netherlands, West Germany, France, Ireland, Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa, New Zealand, Brazil, Switzerland, and Australia. He gave expert testimony for issues related to traffic issues and health damage due to cigarette smoking. He consulted with government and industry on topics as varied as: the use of psychology in consumer research; the use of mass communications in the prevention of drug abuse; risk assessment and risk management in helicopter skiing; the prevention of Search and Rescue incidents; and on trucking and railway crossing safety.

As with his professional life, in his private life Gerry's interests were broad. After his arrival in Canada, he and his family took up sailing, camping and road trips coast to coast. He loved to travel and experience different cultures and spoke seven languages fluently. He had a keen sense of humour, engaged enthusiastically with ideas and with people, loved discussion and debate, and vigorously challenged established and entrenched ideas. His intellectual vigour remained until the end of his life; the day before he died he read three Spanish

newspapers and he wrote notes from his hospital bed the day he died. He was cremated in Mexico and his ashes scattered over the Sierra Madre Mountains.

Gerry will be much missed by his many friends, his sister and brother in Europe, Antoinette, his wife of thirty-five years, their children Annette and Niels, and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, Aidan, Sebastian, Shawna and Ashley, and his wife and travel companion Dawn Clarke.

A memorial service will be held on Sunday, 20th January at 3pm in Sydenham Street United Church. Instead of flowers, the family has asked that donations be made to Amnesty International.