

# Evolution Revolution

## Professor Allan Wilson – *The Boy From Franklin Who Rocked The World*

### Champion of a new wave of undisputable truth

This year is the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, but few New Zealanders know that our understanding of human evolution was spurred forward by the groundbreaking discoveries of an outstanding scientist who grew up on a dairy farm at Helvetia, a few miles from Pukekohe.

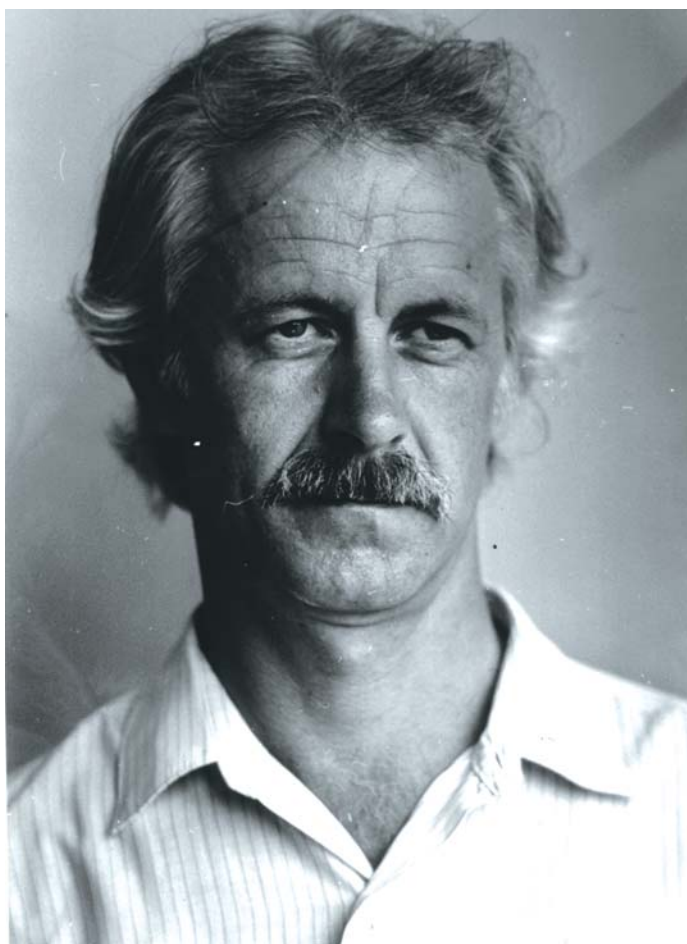
When Professor Allan Wilson died of leukaemia at the age of 56, he had made a number of breakthroughs in the science of evolution and genetics. His investigations into the origins of humanity through biochemistry were revolutionary, yet at the time of his death in 1991 he was still relatively unknown in his home country. Some scientists say that many of the significant advances in the last 20 years have come from the platform he laid in combining the disciplines of biochemistry and zoology.

Allan Wilson gave science new ways to understand how humans evolved and he changed how we study the evolution of all creatures. His work provided a foundation in molecular biology that would affect all the sciences and shake up our previous understanding of human evolution.

Allan, who was born in 1934 at Ngaruawahia, was the eldest of Charlie and Eunice Wilson's three children, all of whom went to Pukekohe Primary School. Even as a young boy, Allan was thinking about evolution and he impressed the Anglican vicar's wife, Mary Partridge, with his searching questions at Sunday School. Rev Tom Partridge and his wife had connections at King's College and they persuaded Allan's parents to enroll him there as day boy.

Through his five years at King's (1947-51) he was always among the top students in his class – and he was a good footballer too. Then one day Allan missed his train back home to Pukekohe and while

he waited in a library, he found an old book on evolution. At that stage he hadn't seen evolution research as a career option, planning instead to learn science to improve productivity on the family farm. That chance encounter with the book, however, changed his life's direction and he decided to head for Otago University after his time at King's and to major in both zoology and biochemistry. At that time they were quite separate subjects. Professors of each of those sciences had little understanding of the other's subject specialty, so by following this dual path, Allan became the first to bridge the gap.



*Allan Wilson: Professor Allan Wilson (Photo NZ Herald)*

From Otago, where he completed his B.Sc in 1954, Allan went on to do his M.Sc at Washington State University in Pullman. He then did his Ph.D at the University of California in Berkeley where he later joined the teaching and research staff. It was at Berkeley that Allan conducted most of the research that led to the findings which have inspired (and sometimes confounded and enraged) other scientists around the world. But he also spent time at other universities including Brandeis in Boston and then in Kenya, Scotland, Israel and Japan. From time to time he came back to New Zealand to visit his family and friends and give lectures – and, on his last visit in 1989, to receive an honorary doctorate from Otago University.

In 1990 Allan was diagnosed with leukaemia and, in an effort to overcome the disease, he opted to go to a Seattle hospital for a bone marrow transplant. That, however, was unsuccessful and he died in July, 1991. By then he had won numerous international awards and, according to his colleagues, would surely have won a Nobel Prize in due course too – had he lived. Allan left a wife, Leona (a New Yorker whom he had met in his student days at Berkeley) and two adult children – Ruth, who is scientist herself, and David, whose specialty has been computers.

*Cont. on page 24*