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Obituary for Sydney Davison: the founder of progress in surface science

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Obituary for Sydney Davison: The founder of progress in surface science

Last year, the founder of Progress in Surface Science, Sydney Davison, passed away. He left us, besides his students, happy memories of his many collaborators, and 150 publications in the web of science. His work as founder and first editor of Progress in Surface Science will always be remembered and remains his lasting contribution to science. His work on the Journal started by its foundation in 1968. It is quite some time ago, in 2003, that he stepped down as Editor-in-Chief. But he always remained in contact with the Journal through his position of 'founding editor'. He has been at the helm for 35 years, and closely connected to the Journal for more than 50 years. Although this sadly follows the passing of two other past editorial members, Prof. Hiromu Ueba and Prof. Patricia Thiel in the past year, the Journal has taken new editors who are carrying on Sydney's dream. He was succeeded as Editor-in-Chief by Prof. Aart Kleyn, while the present editor Prof. Hrvoje Petek took over from Aart. Sydney's wife, Prudence, known to all of us as Prue, has always worked with him on the Journal and ran its daily operation for more than 35 years. In the following Prue shares some recollections about Sydney with us, giving a very personal view of the Founding Editor of Progress in Surface Science.

I first met Sydney on a hike in the Derbyshire Hills. I had been invited for a weekend over an Easter holiday. Some friends of Sydney's, all students at Manchester University organized a day out, probably to relax and enjoy a game of soccer before their final exams. Trying to play soccer on soggy grass on a hillside, well, not my cup of tea. Most of the students studying theology, engineering, law, dentistry and nursing, really wanted to enjoy themselves... oh and there was one theoretical physicist, Sydney!

Later in the day, the same group tried to gather again to watch a movie in the centre of Manchester. When Sydney invited me, I said "No!", until I was told that nine people were going, and I thought "OK?" I had to return to Liverpool the next day, and again Sydney told me he had to go to the library at Liverpool University to collect a book. I thought the long, slow train journey from Manchester to Liverpool would be pleasant, which turned out to be interesting, we got to learn a lot about each other. Those who knew Sydney knew he loved to talk, but mainly about science, of course.

This was a time when we tried to arrange our only afternoon off per week, so we managed to visit places we normally would not have seen, thankfully we both enjoyed walking. Strolling along the beach from Blundell Sands in Liverpool where I worked, with not a care in the world, was enjoyable, but again, we talked a lot about Sydney's ideas of the future. We were married a year later. Sydney was teaching Physics at a Grammar School, but he did not really enjoy teaching at that level. He was also taking an external math degree from Oxford University. He asked me if I would support him while he completed his PhD. I was delighted and thankfully, that took only two years of his dedicated hard work to accomplish.

Jobs were hard to come by in the UK, so one day we were walking in Liverpool, when we came across Canada House, we both said simultaneously – "Why not?". We walked in and asked if there were any jobs in Canada and was given a list of almost everything from plumbers to professors. We were delighted that within four weeks Sydney was offered five positions. He liked the sound of the very new University of Waterloo in Ontario. It had a 5,000-acre campus and a few buildings but mostly huts, yes literally huts! His PhD oral exam was set for July 13th, and on the next day we flew TWA from London, to New York then on to Toronto. I do not know how we managed to obtain passports and pack our few belongings, but we did. Sydney accepted a postdoc with Doug Henderson in the Physics Department, Doug was also another new faculty member from the US, but within a short period of time Sydney decided that Fluid Mechanics was not his first love. Sydney always talked about wanting to form a Review Journal in Science but writing his lecture notes and doing research was a full-time job, and a seven-day week was never enough. Eventually he spoke to his chairman about his ideas and the possibility of starting a journal, fortunately he was supportive. Sydney approached a couple of publishers, and after a long wait it seemed the answer would be 'No'. However, Pergamon Press in Oxford showed some interest, and he was eventually invited to visit England and it was like fireworks had begun. A few of his colleagues thought he was dreaming. It did take a few years to get established, the crazy pace that was surrounding Sydney seemed like he was living in a dream. I often wondered if he would ever stop to smell the roses. It probably took a few years before the first volume came out, but the enthusiasm was certainly catching in our household. It seemed we both just wanted this episode in our lives to keep going. It was about 10 years from completing his PhD to the first volume of the Review Journal, but I loved the hard work as much as he did. I often had to type papers from countries around the world on an IBM electric (golf ball) typewriter, it takes one back a long way to think about how things have progressed. Sydney also

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read every paper and made suggestions as well as each article being reviewed, but he loved it and never seemed to tire even though we were also bringing up our two sons, Terry and Timothy. I was there, thankfully, for support, encouragement and all the delightful parts of being involved on his journey. We had a lot of support from the University of Waterloo and throughout Sydney's career, he certainly never looked back. Some of our friends in science, some still active, used to debate and discuss with Sydney, again more fireworks. In those early years of starting a Review Journal we got the support from the Advisory Board, which was so essential to the journal. Each member was an expert in different areas, and I enjoyed being able to speak with many of them. Hard work, and dedication from everyone involved made things a lot easier. Finally, as time passed, modern technology, computerization and the internet, Sydney and I were most grateful that this project was passed into the capable hands of the well-deserved, and highly thought of Dr. Kleyn and later Dr. Petek, and I know that the journal and his team and all those involved will continue with existing experiences and stories of their own. Way to go Progress in Surface Science.

Unfortunately, the first dates of publication I am not sure of, or the very first author or the handover to Elsevier Science etc. I cannot face the enormous task of going through Sydney's files and folders, one day hopefully. Sydney received medals from Poland and the Czech Republic for his involvement with many scientists. How during the Russian invasion into the Czech Republic, it was a long weekend in Canada (Labour Day) Sydney managed to arrange for three scientists to join The University of Waterloo. During the long weekend Sydney talked to the Chairman of Mathematics (Sydney joined the Mathematics department in the late 1960's). He then spoke to the Dean of Mathematics and eventually the President of the University who were able to fund their support. But on another note, maybe you are interested that Sydney received the Distinguished Professor Emeritus from Mathematics at the University of Waterloo, not too many of those Distinctions are awarded.

I am sorry if details of the scientific development of the journal are missing, but I am happy for an earlier article in the journal by Aart Kleyn, summarizing the development of Progress in Surface Science from the very beginning until 2003, when Sydney stepped down as Editor [1].

Recently, I had the COVID-19, and thankfully I recovered but am very grateful that my son Timothy was able to come from Northern Ireland to help me through it. With Terry living in California, it was not possible for him to help with all the restrictions with the COVID virus. I had not seen Timothy in the first week of his stay as he self-isolated, I was helped through all this with the nutritious meals three times a day, where my meals would appear on a tray outside my bedroom. Over the first week we had to communicate by phone to keep him away from any virus. I was then admitted to hospital for a week, to help me get over a lung infection resulting from COVID 19, it had been a few months before I was able to leave my home.

I wish all involved with the Journal well, and I am thinking back with happy memories on Sydney's long journey with Progress in Surface Science, I was delighted to have shared memories of those 35 years together. It was a lifetime ago but at times feels like yesterday.



Sydney Davison.

Reference

- [1] A.W. Kleyn, A tribute to Sydney G. Davison, *Prog. Surf. Sci.* 73 (2003) 57–58.

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