

Guest editorial

Special Issue: Dedicated to David D. Wynn-Williams

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1946–2002



David Donaldson Wynn-Williams, born 16th July, 1946, in West Kirby, Cheshire, UK and Founding Editor of the *International Journal of Astrobiology*, met an ‘untimely and unjust death’ (W. Block, *Independent*, 4th April, 2002) on 24th March, 2002, which left his colleagues and family deeply saddened.

David’s Editorial to the first issue of the *International Journal of Astrobiology* in January 2002 provided a clear definition of astrobiology and its goals for human endeavour; in his inimitable style, he concluded his article with the statement, ‘Astrobiology is alive and well’. His opinion is clearly true and can be ascribed in no small measure to David, and others like him, who have brought their own scientific expertise into interdisciplinary boundaries and have driven the applications with infectious enthusiasm.

David’s enthusiasm for astronomy began when he was 7 years old. As his scientific career developed he became focused on biological questions. He joined the British Antarctic Survey in 1974 and began to ask questions about how microorganisms survived the intense desiccation and ultraviolet radiation regimens imposed upon them by the polar desert. Throughout these years he continued to harbour an interest in space sciences. In 1999 when he was asked to establish the British Antarctic Astrobiology Project he found an opportunity to link his interest in space sciences with his expertise in microbiology, indulging his intellectual interests to the full, David began an extraordinary period of scientific productivity and established the British

Antarctic Survey as a focal point for astrobiology activity in the UK and internationally.

In this Special Issue, a number of David's colleagues and research collaborators have been invited to present novel research material which reflects his three main scientific interests: microbiology, Antarctic science and astrobiology – David played an important role in the development of a core theme which unified these interests. This Special Issue, therefore, can be identified as a representation of David's work; the esteem in which he was held by other colleagues, who are not featured in this Issue, is also recognized.

At David's funeral service on the 4th April, 2002, in the charming 13th Century University Church of Great St Mary's in Cambridge, over 200 people witnessed the diversity of his contributions to science, his deep-rooted love of the Antarctic and his appreciation of music. A moving passage from the diary of the Antarctic pioneer, Edward Wilson, written 100 years ago, was read by David's colleague and friend Dr Cynan Ellis-Evans, with whom he first published the famous *Nature* article on 'Vostok: the great lake under the ice' in 1996. Now, Lake Vostok is the novel if not unique subject of potential extremophile studies which have a direct bearing on the exobiology of Europa, an ice-covered moon of Jupiter.

It is perhaps fitting that the survival strategies of organisms in that harsh terrestrial environment of the Antarctic, so beloved by David, should be instrumental in our understanding of exobiology and in the development of strategies for the detection of relict or extant life through biomolecular signatures.

With this in mind, we dedicate this Special Issue of the *International Journal of Astrobiology*, to the work of David Wynn-Williams,* a polymath whose life was tragically cut short at the height of a scientific career that had seen the publication of over 100 research papers.

Howell Edwards
Charles Cockell

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