

William Abell Wimsatt

July 28, 1917 — January 9, 1985

William Abell Wimsatt died at his home in Ithaca, New York, after a courageous fight against cancer. He was born in Washington, D.C., the oldest of three sons of Alma Cheyney and William Church Wimsatt. After his father's early death Bill spent his summers on Chesapeake Bay and his winters in Tarpon Springs, Florida. Both environments inspired him with an enduring love of the out-of-doors. He developed such a keen interest in birds, especially birds of prey, that he trained several hawks for falconry and retained a lifelong interest in the sport.

When Bill was a student at St. John's Preparatory School in Washington, D.C., he attended a lecture by Professor Arthur A. Allen, the colorful Cornell ornithologist who triggered his strong desire to study at Cornell. His mother's serious illness prevented his coming to Ithaca for a time, but after her death he transferred from Catholic University in Washington to the College of Arts and Sciences at Cornell, where he spent his senior year. After graduation Bill became one of "Doc" Allen's graduate students in ornithology and soon published five communications on birds.

In 1940 Bill married Ruth Claire Peterson, a fellow student in Allen's ornithology class. Of their six children, Bill, Jr., Ph.D.; Michael, M.D.; John, A.A.S.; Mary, M. A.; Jeffrey, D.V.M.; and Ruth, B.S., five followed in their parents' footsteps in receiving degrees from Cornell.

When Bill took a course given by the distinguished embryologist Howard B. Adelmann, he was inspired to broaden his interests and changed his major to anatomy and embryology with Dr. Adelmann as his doctoral committee chairman. Bill was pleased that through Adelmann he could trace his scientific lineage to the great seventeenth-century anatomist Marcello Malpighi. His sense of history, however, never hindered Bill in exploring new ideas and new methods, whether in research, teaching, or social relationships.

In 1943, after Bill had received his doctorate at Cornell, he became an instructor of anatomy at Harvard Medical School. In 1945 he returned to Cornell as an assistant professor of zoology; in 1947 he became an associate professor; in 1951, a professor of zoology, a title he proudly held until his death. He was an active member of the Section of Genetics, Development, and Physiology in the Division of Biological Sciences, and from 1945 until 1960 he also taught histology and embryology to students in the College of Veterinary Medicine.

One of Bill's outstanding traits was his absolute loyalty to family, friends, and the institutions he loved. It was this loyalty that made him accept onerous tasks willingly, knowing full well they would consume much of his time, his

energy, and his patience. Prior to the complete reorganization of the field of biology at Cornell, Bill was chairman of the Department of Zoology. During the planning of the shuffle it became clear that the Department of Zoology would be dissolved and that none of the new sections would even have the term *zoology* in their names. Bill was the vigorous and vociferous advocate of zoology, but once the die was cast, he called the chairman of the committee planning the reorganization and asked, "How can I help to make it work?" This loyalty to Cornell and its best interests had its counterpart in the loyalty his family, friends, and students felt for him.

It was inspiring to see Bill in the laboratory engaged in animated discussion with his undergraduates and graduate student assistants. In his inimitable way he impressed them with his ability boldly to integrate structure and function. No student who took his course ever forgot this experience.

In addition to serving Cornell on innumerable committees and as a faculty trustee (1960-65) Bill was the recipient of many richly deserved honors. He authored more than eighty-five publications for professional journals and served as the organizer and editor of a widely acclaimed multivolume series on the biology of bats, which was published by Academic Press. At the time of his death, volume four of *Biology of Bats* was in preparation. Bill was devoted to his professional societies, attended meetings as frequently as time permitted, and served as an associate editor of the *American Journal of Anatomy* for eleven years.

The imagination and attention to detail that characterized his research was evident in his cabinet making. He was a superb craftsman in whatever he built, whether it was miniature ships or chests of drawers.

One of his most prized possessions was a log cabin on a large tract of land in the Danby hills. Slowly and laboriously he added a Great Room with a fireplace that burned five-foot logs, and here he and Ruth graciously entertained graduate students, colleagues, and friends. It is on this land that Bill's ashes were scattered and that Bill became a part of the environment he loved so dearly.

Howard E. Evans, Ari van Tienhoven, Perry W. Gilbert