

William J. Hamilton, Jr.

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To reduce a highly accomplished, multidimensional life, such as Bill Hamilton's, to a few pages of text is a challenge. The statistics of accomplishment are relatively easy. Professor William J. Hamilton, Jr. studied the natural history of organisms, primarily small mammals, but also fishes, amphibians, insects, disease organisms, and plants. His bibliography (which will be published by two of his students in the *Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America*) extends from 1928 to 1988 and includes 225 papers on animals, another ten on plants, and three books that have appeared in five editions to date. *Mammals of Eastern United States* published by Cornell University Press, was a pioneering effort that remains indispensable even now, almost fifty years after it first appeared. Bill Hamilton was a member of many scientific societies, but was most devoted to two, the American Society of Mammalogists and the Ecological Society of America. He was a founding member of the latter and he served both in several offices including that of president, and as zoological editor of *Ecological Monographs*. Bill Hamilton was a fellow of the American Association of Arts and Sciences, the New York Academy of Science, and the Royal Horticultural Society of England and his biography appears in *Who's Who in America*. Special honors include the prestigious Marcel LePinec Award of the American Rock Garden Society, the Outstanding Alumni Award of the New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and the establishment of the William J. Hamilton, Jr. Lecture Series at Cornell Plantations, where he served on the advisory board for years. Bill Hamilton was also instrumental in the founding and later direction of the Edmund Nyles Huyck Preserve and Biological Laboratory in Rensselaerville, New York. He is further honored and will be remembered in the scientific name *hamiltoni* applied to one fish, four invertebrates, and one black bear.

Bill Hamilton's remarkable, extended relationship with Cornell University is also easily delineated. He entered as a student in 1922, progressed without break through B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees, the last as a student of Albert Hazen Wright. He was then immediately appointed an instructor and thereby commenced a steady progression through the ranks of faculty, interrupted only by military service of three and one-half years during the second world war. Bill was awarded professor emeritus status in 1963. At his death, this close Cornell relationship was just two months shy of 68 years' duration.

Bill Hamilton married a Cornell student and native Ithacan, Nellie Rightmyer, a collector and connoisseur of stamps and sea shells who has donated her shell collection to Cornell. They had three children all of whom

graduated from Cornell. Their son, William J. Hamilton, III, is now a professor of zoology at the University of California at Davis.

Among 150 graduate students on whose committees he served, and in his undergraduate courses, Bill taught at least seven students who themselves were later chosen as faculty members at Cornell. Others are also now sprinkled through a host of distinguished American colleges and universities.

To capture in a few words the man whose character and soul are behind this remarkable record is the real challenge.

As a child growing up in Corona, Queens County, (greater New York City), Bill Hamilton exhibited an entrepreneurial instinct and an urgent curiosity about the organisms, both plant and animal, that populated the world about him. He trapped muskrats in the Flushing Meadows and sold the pelts. He caught timber rattlesnakes in the Ramapo Mountains, a short distance away, for the Bronx Zoo. He speared carp for local fish markets. He dug and peddled soft-shelled clams from the mud flats where within a decade appeared the New York World's Fair, and later, Laguardia Airport. He vended packets of flower seeds door to door. He trapped specimens of local wildlife for the museums of New York City. In all these endeavors it appears that Bill Hamilton made a good profit.

When the time came, young William J. Hamilton, Jr. applied, and was admitted at Harvard College. He chose to come to Cornell instead when he saw that Cornell had the better array of courses dealing with organisms of all kinds.

In the years that followed, any incompatibility of Bill Hamilton's entrepreneurial instinct with the life of a scholar had to be subjugated to the strictures and mores of academia. That he did this successfully is indelibly certified by his attainment of the Cornell Ph.D. degree. Signs of incomplete subjugation were, however, visible throughout the remainder of Bill Hamilton's life. He eschewed administrative responsibilities, acting as department head only briefly and on an interim basis. His character was not comfortably compatible with the academic granting system that developed over his lifetime. Bill wrote few if any grant applications. His remarkable record of research publication was built largely on materials at hand in his own backyard. His investigations were accomplished mostly in a research laboratory based on a sink. A razor blade was his chief exploratory instrument. A trickle of Hatch Act funding requiring little paperwork and his own salary provided investigator Hamilton's principal financial support.

In a word, Bill Hamilton was impatient. He was goal-directed and impatient of any artificial impediment. He was focused and impatient of any unnecessary diversion. He was direct and impatient of any dissimulation. He

was particularly impatient with the customary veneer of human civilization, thin though it sometimes is, and preferred the unvarnished reality of the natural world. The clichés of ordinary human life were anathema to him. Consciously or unconsciously he aimed to provoke a reaction from those around him that exposed the genuine individual. His principal tool was a sharp wit often used outrageously but never caustically. His famous tall stories regularly progressed from the false but believable to the patently ridiculous, to which the auditor was eventually forced to react.

At the same time Bill Hamilton was a warm, engaged, helpful friend to students and colleagues who got beyond a superficial reaction to him. Fundamentally a shy person, he allowed his enthusiasm for his subject to transcend his shyness when teaching. He attracted serious students easily and he led them carefully, but he minced no words. He insisted not only on meticulous recording of observations, but additionally on developing the habit that made such record-keeping second nature. He, himself, kept a detailed daily journal throughout his life, and drew from it heavily in his publications.

Bill Hamilton believed deeply that the public should be better informed about the natural world of animals and plants. All of his publications were written in a style intended to be easily accessible and functionally useful. In addition to purely scholarly articles, he wrote frequently for general-circulation publications. All inquiries from the public that reached his desk were answered carefully and immediately. In his classes, Professor Hamilton showed especial concern and compassion for floundering students, helping them without stint.

Professor Hamilton came to Cornell to study with the first generation of Cornell greats in biology. He was among the second generation of those greats, and he taught a large number of persons who were chosen into the third academic generation of Cornell faculty in biological sciences. He saw the subject evolve around him, and he experienced the shifting organization that characterized Cornell's need to refine the roles of the Medical College, the Veterinary College, and the basic science of biology as taught in the College of Arts and Sciences and the New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Over those long years he was required to move from building to building, and department to department with each new restructuring. Eventually he balked at a final move into the Division of Biological Sciences and retired at age 60 instead.

Retirement allowed Bill Hamilton to refocus a lifelong interest in plants. He had already turned the three-acre plot around his suburban home into a genuine botanical garden which often attracted visitors literally by the bus load. Now he gave increased attention to techniques and "tricks" based on an intimate knowledge of fundamental growth requirements often derived from his own observations, for establishing tender southern species outdoors

in Ithaca. He added almost one hundred new names to the list of plants demonstrated as winter-hardy in upstate New York. He also competed annually to be the top supplier in an informal seed exchange of the American Rock Garden Society, and in recent years usually won.

William J. Hamilton, Jr. served Cornell splendidly and long with a humility rare in the academic world. When visited by friends and former students during his final illness the twinkle in his eye showed that while death would consume his body, nothing will quench his spirit. May it live on in all who knew him.

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