Obituary for William Robert Derrick Sewell 1931-1987

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W. R. Derrick Sewell died on December 14, 1987 at the early age of 56 from complications following heart bypass surgery. His death was a major loss to resource management, a field in which he was still very active.

Derrick was born at Rock Ferry, Lancashire on February 9, 1931 and educated at both the Universities of London and Washington. In Britain, he studied at University College London and the London School of Economics, receiving his B.S. in Economics in 1954. He then attended the University of Washington as a Fulbright scholar, being granted his M.A. in Geography in 1956. From 1957 to 1963, Derrick worked as an economist for the Canadian Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources. He was awarded a Ph.D. in Geography from the University of Washington in 1964. After two years as an assistant professor at the University of Chicago, Derrick became a member of the faculty of the University of Victoria, where for several years he taught in both the Departments of Geography and Economics. In 1969, he attained the rank of professor in the Geography Department and served as its chairman from July 1979 to June 1984.

Derrick Sewell was a world traveler and dedicated lecturer. His first love, however, was research and, as a consequence, he authored or edited approximately 180 books and articles. These covered a wide variety of topics, although the bulk of the work dealt with environmental management, especially water resources and energy. His initial research included an examination of economic and institutional adjustments to floods in the Lower Fraser Valley, paralleled by a review of the management of the Lower Mekong River. He also made major contributions to the literature on benefit/cost analysis, public participation and perception studies, weather modification and solar energy policy design. More recently, his publications focused on the impact of water quality and availability on the future of Canadian agriculture and on techniques for stimulating the pres-
ervation of wilderness. Derrick was honored for this distinguished body of work in August 1981, when the Canadian Association of Geographers presented him with its Award for Scholarly Distinction in Geography.

As a result of his widely recognized expertise in resource management, Derrick frequently served as a government advisor. In 1966, for example, he acted as chairman of the U.S. National Science Foundation’s Task Group on Human Dimensions of the Atmosphere. In 1972, he led a Canadian delegation to assess the French approach to water pollution control. In 1976 he was appointed advisor to the World Bank on water supply and waste disposal. In fact, during the period 1966–1987 Derrick served 160 times on national and international environmental committees, helping to write dozens of related reports. In 1983 and again in 1984, for example, he lead a United Nations team to examine a proposal to divert water from the Mediterranean Sea to the Dead Sea.

Derrick was always involved in promoting environmental issues. As a consequence, he helped organize 15 symposia between 1967 and 1985. These included one on the “Management of Atmospheric Quality” held in Toronto in 1969 and another in Montreal in 1980 devoted to “Energy ConservationThrough Land Use Planning.” In addition, he was a frequent guest on both Canadian, English and French language radio and television, where he discussed topics ranging from solar home heating to future North American water crises. Derrick Sewell was also a prolific guest speaker. During the past five years, for example, he gave 141 guest lectures in universities and research institutions around the globe.

Despite the overwhelming schedule he kept, Derrick was always willing to inconvenience himself for students, friends or colleagues. Nobody entertained more visiting academics than Derrick. It was Derrick who usually drove them from and to the airport, made them feel welcome and invited them to his home. He also went out of his way to help younger colleagues and graduate students, strongly encouraging both their research and publications. When work was hard to find, Derrick lobbied his worldwide network of friends for employment opportunities for them.

W. R. Derrick Sewell was a geographer, economist and expert in resource management who had an international reputation for scholarship. He was also well liked by his colleagues, his friends, and the thousands of undergraduate and graduate students he taught and who continued to spread his message. His death was a blow to both academia and to those demanding better resource management. He is missed by his wife Elizabeth, daughters Kirsty and Wendy Anne and son Robert as well as by his many friends.

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