A MEMORIAL TRIBUTE TO WILLIAM L. BROWN
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BY EDWARD O. WILSON

Harvard University, Museum of Comparative Zoology,
Cambridge, MA 02138-2902 USA

I knew him for 50 years, and I've never met anyone else remotely like him. Bill Brown was unique, and I don't think we'll ever see his like again, not just for the rareness of his character, but for the uniqueness of the time in which he lived and worked on his beloved ants. I've thought a lot about what made Bill different, what caused him to burn with such a pure inner light, and I've come up with this: the devotion to his art. His *art*. He was a scientist to the bone, a hard-core factual investigator, relentless for more information, skeptical in mood, all those things and yet . . . myrmecology, the study of ants, was an art form to him. It was the center of his creative life, and he was a very creative man. The passion he radiated about this subject turned younger people (we all seemed younger than Uncle Bill) into acolytes, into apprentices; and there was no prize the academic world could offer us more than a rare, measured compliment from the master, something like "Yeah, that's pretty good; that's really interesting."

I first met Bill through correspondence in 1947, when I was 18, and already taken my vows, so to speak, in ant taxonomy, just as he had been in contact with *his* mentor, William S. (Bill) Creighton, since he was 16. In natural history, addiction occurs early. In the summer of 1950, I rode a Greyhound bus all the way from Mobile, Alabama, to Boston, and stayed with Bill and Doris in their little apartment near Harvard, as they prepared to leave for Australia and momentous field research in that still myrmecologically underexplored continent. We worked in the MCZ ant collection together, and he gave me the kind of plain, sincere egalitarian treatment he was to bestow on dozens of other students in his field in the decades to follow. He welcomed you, he treated you with respect, he stood in awe with you before the intricacy

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Fig. 1. William L. Brown Jr. at 30, collecting at Ferntree Gully, Dandenong Ranges, 1952. (Used with permission of Doris E. Brown.)

of the subject, he gladly taught and learned, he created a sense that here in this little discipline was something—to borrow from F. Scott Fitzgerald, the kind of writer Bill so admired—something commensurate to man's capacity for wonder.

Fig. 2. Bill Brown at 39, Cornell, 1961. (Photo by Thomas Eisner.)

In 1950, he was 28 and I was 21, and the whole world seemed ours to possess.

Off he went to Australia, and in the years to follow just about to every other place in the world where interesting ants are to be found,

and he was often the first to do serious collecting there. In time he became one of the most widely traveled naturalists of all time, bar none.

He was a key transitional figure in the history of myrmecology. From 1937, when William Morton Wheeler died, into the 1960s, there were very few researchers working on the classification and ecology of ants, and Bill carried the torch to close the gap. He played a major role in changing ant systematics from a thicket of trinomials and quadrinomials into a consistent binomial system based on the modern biological species concept. He was the first to recognize the major phyletic division of the myrmecioid and poneroid subfamily groups. He made judicious rearrangements of genera and tribes, "sank" innumerable worthless names into synonymy, and crafted clear, precise revisions widely through the Formicidae and most especially in his favorite groups, the Dacetonini and Ponerinae.

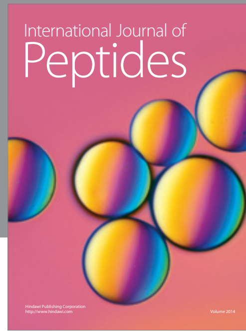
His open, supportive nature drew young people in, and he played a major role in starting the current boom times in which hundreds are engaged in myrmecology around the world. We have truly followed in his footsteps.

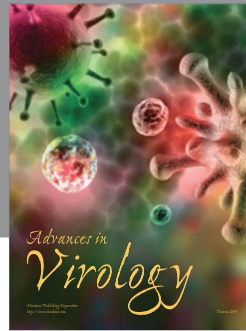
Bill Brown was a working-class guy with a first-class mind and a noble heart. He had steel-hard integrity and his generosity to others knew no bounds. He hated a phony, to use one of his favorite words, could smell one a city block away, and put currency in only two things: solid accomplishment and integrity of purpose and representation. He never looked down on anybody socially and he never looked up to anybody. He was unimpressed by rank and status. He never played academic politics, never sought academic recognition or status, but instead waved aside compliments and put others first in research collaboration; he was a righteous man to the inner core.

Toward the end of his life we used to talk about his dream field trip: get into a rich rain forest, sit at a table with a pan and collecting materials, and have graduate students scour the surrounding woods for ant nests which they bring to him to sort, study, and preserve. Dig through some of the "juicy red logs" where ant diversity peaks. In March 1987, while he was still sufficiently vigorous, I invited him along on a field trip to La Selva, the Organization for Tropical Studies station in Costa Rica. I sat him down on a field chair with a table in front of him, and *I* was the graduate student, hustling the ant nests for him to go through; and we talked incessantly about the treasures we found. It was a glorious three days.

Fig. 3. Bill at 64, in the field at La Selva, Costa Rica, March 1987.

In his later years Bill filled the same role in myrmecology and among his wider circle of students and admirers as the grizzly bear plays in the conservation movement. You didn't see him very often, and some younger researchers never did, but it made you feel good just to know he was there. It made things seem right. Now that he's gone, a big gap has been opened up in our consciousness that will never be completely closed.





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