

Rob Kempton – Obituary for the Royal Statistical Society

Rob Kempton, Director of Biomathematics & Statistics Scotland (BioSS) since its inception in 1987, died of a heart attack while on a cycling holiday in North Yorkshire, on Sunday May 11th 2003 at the age of 56. He was President-elect of the International Biometric Society and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

Rodney Alistair Kempton, or Rob as he was known by all, was born in Isleworth, Middlesex in 1946. After attending Chislehurst and Sidcup Grammar School, he read mathematics at Wadham College, Oxford, graduating in 1968. He followed this by a B. Phil. at Oxford in Applied Statistics, an almost unique qualification as the course was discontinued after just one year.

Rob's first job was as a statistician at Rothamsted Experimental Station. Here he laid the foundations of his lifelong enthusiasm for biometry and the opportunity it provided for his involvement in a wide range of applications in the life sciences. He established successful collaborations in entomology and nematology, and published a series of papers on species diversity. Later this led to a book, written jointly with Pete Digby, on 'Multivariate Analysis of Ecological Communities' (Chapman and Hall, 1987).

Rob was appointed Head of Statistics at the Plant Breeding Institute in Cambridge in 1976. His subsequent contributions to design and analysis of experiments with spatial trends and treatment carryover effects was stimulated by his observations of plant breeding trials. He played a key role in developing spatial methods for analysing such experiments, including a landmark paper with Julian Besag (Biometrics, 42, 1986, 231-251). The book that he edited with PN Fox, 'Statistical Methods for Plant Variety Evaluation' (Chapman and Hall, 1997), encapsulated, in Rob's typically clear and concise style, many of the statistical good-practices in plant breeding.

In 1986, Rob moved to Edinburgh as founding director of the Scottish Agricultural Statistics Service (SASS). This brought together a network of statisticians supporting agricultural research organisations in Aberdeen, Ayr, Dundee and Edinburgh. He worked energetically to ensure that the benefit of this sizeable collection of specialists was fully realised. These were difficult times for public sector scientific research, the need for which seemed constantly to be questioned by government, and for statisticians, in particular, as research priorities moved away from subjects with which statisticians were traditionally associated. Yet Rob's argument, that scientific research needed to be underpinned by research-level statisticians, was accepted. He saw the changing priorities for scientific research as an opportunity rather than a threat. His vision took SASS from being a purely statistical organisation to encompass the disciplines of mathematical modelling and bioinformatics, with a broadening of application areas from agriculture to the environment, food, health and risk. Associated with this change in activities came, in 1995, a change of name, from SASS to BioSS. The resulting organisation is internationally regarded as a model for how to harness the potential of statistics and mathematics to improve the quality and effectiveness of scientific research.

Rob continued to pursue his research interests in experimental design and published jointly with PhD students (e.g. David and Kempton, *Biometrics*, 52, 1996, 597-606 and Kempton, Ferris and David, *Biometrika*, 88, 2001, 391-399). He also established himself as an expert in the statistical analysis of risk, and led a group studying methods for assessing potential health risks from food, including pesticides, microbial organisms and GMOs. He was on the Food Standards Agency's (FSA) working group on Risks from Mixtures of Pesticides, external reviewer of the FSA Food Safety Programme, and a member of the Risk Analysis Committee of the International Statistical Institute.

Rob also served on many other committees and review groups, including RSS Council. He was a strong supporter of the International Biometric Society (IBS), and gave many years of service to its work, as British region secretary and president, and on IBS committees. His proudest achievement was a scheme he initiated in the late 1980s to support East Africans with membership of the IBS. This helped establish IBS groups in Africa, and led to the formation of the Sub-Saharan African Network of biometricians (SUSAN). He had recently been elected Vice-President of IBS, to serve as President 2004-2005, and was already starting to plan his presidential address, to have been delivered at the International Biometric Conference in 2004.

Rob married Annelise Sorensen in 1972, and they have a daughter and twin sons. He was a founder member of the Edinburgh branch of 'Woodcraft Folk', a youth movement dedicated to building a world based on equality, friendship and peace. He was a keen walker and cyclist who loved the Scottish hills, and enjoyed collecting antiquarian books, particularly of Robert Louis Stevenson.

Rob was a modest, generous and kind man, who focused on people's strengths and brought out the best in them. He enjoyed life and he particularly enjoyed being a biometrician. As he recently wrote for the RSS's careers web-site: "I like the one-to-one contact with people that one gets in consultancy work, and the increasing international character of scientific research. All in all, it's turned out to be the best possible career for me."

Just a week before his unexpected death, Rob bought a book of John Clare's poetry, whose final poem, "I am!", he read aloud to his son Ben, whom he was visiting in London. Ben read the final verse again at Rob's funeral service:

I long for scenes where man has never trod;
A place where woman never smil'd or wept;
There to abide with my creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept:
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie;
The grass below - above the vaulted sky.

Chris Glasbey, David Elston and Mike Talbot