

## Samuel Devons

September 30, 1914 – December 6, 2006

Samuel Devons, Professor Emeritus of Physics at Columbia University, died at age 92 on December 6, 2006, in Mt. Sinai Hospital, New York City.

The son of an emigrant from Lithuania who became a rabbi, he was born in Bangor (Wales) on September 30, 1914. At age 16, he won a prestigious scholarship to Cambridge University's Trinity College where he received his bachelor's degree in 1935 and his doctorate in 1939. All his life, he treasured the legacy of Ernest Rutherford at the Cavendish Laboratory. Just a year ago he traveled to London to be honored for his 50 years as a Fellow of the Royal Society, then celebrated his ninety-first birthday at the high table of Trinity College.

During World War II, Samuel Devons worked as a scientific officer in the Air Ministry on anti-aircraft barrages, as well as on microwaves and radar. At the end of the war, he was a UK-US liaison officer stationed at the MIT Radiation Laboratory in Cambridge, MA. He returned to Britain after the war and did research and taught physics at Cambridge University, Imperial College - London, and the University of Manchester. After a year-long visit in 1959, he accepted a professorial appointment at Columbia University, New York, where he chaired the Physics Department from 1963-1967.

Over the ensuing years, he held visiting appointments in Argentina, Andhra University in India, and two major institutions in Israel. He served for many years as a member of the Board of Governors for Israel's Weizmann Institute, was a Fellow of the Royal Society and a Fellow of the American Physical Society, as well as recipient of the prestigious Rutherford medal and prize in 1970.

He retired in 1984 but remained as active as ever as an Emeritus Professor. His never flagging curiosity always led him into new projects and areas of exploration, both scientific and humanitarian. Devons' productive scientific career at Columbia encompassed forefront research into properties of nuclei, including use of heavy nuclei to capture muons, a heavy electron-like particle, to form atoms. These emit X-rays that characterize the nuclear electric charge properties. Graduate students often characterized their collegial contacts with Devons as providing unique hands-on learning of experimental science.

Devons' teaching career mirrored this emphasis on learning by doing. He became director of the History of Physics Laboratory at Barnard College and devoted increasing energy to the task of opening science to nonscientists. His teaching emphasis was to provide early opportunities for undergraduates to design experiments, an experience that even professional scientists often postpone to late in their education. During the 1980's, he organized the "The Joseph Priestley Society" at Columbia to promote interactions among university faculty, high school teachers, and science museum administrators. Devons served as president and organized discussions and seminars at Columbia about optimal ways to teach science and the important role of hands-on experiments for students.

He was a renowned scholar on various historical aspects of physics, particularly on the lives and works of Newton, Franklin, Volta, and Rutherford. As recently as November 2004, when he was 90 years old, he gave a well-attended and well-received physics colloquium at Columbia on "Benjamin Franklin: Electron, Electricity and King's College, New York." Connections between physics and other sciences, particularly biology, attracted his interest and were promoted by Devons.

He was devoted to Columbia, constantly looking hard for improvements. A generation of Columbians knew him as the mace-bearer at Commencements, with his splendid beard and scarlet Cambridge robes. But many also recognized that he devoted enormous energies to preserving and restoring the contacts among faculty members at the Faculty House and in fostering the Emeritus Professors in Columbia (EPIC), a group he founded in 1999. He envisioned EPIC as a repository of institutional memory and identity in an age of rapid turnover and increasing administrative centralization. He worked all his life to broaden the intellectual world in which he and his colleagues lived.

He is survived by his wife of 68 years, Ruth, and by four daughters: Susan, Judith, Amanda, and Cathryn; by his sister Nina of Israel; by grandchildren: Laura, Marc, Ben, Daniel, Jesse, David, Jonathan, Anna, Jacob, Rachel, Jessica and Matthew; and by great grandchildren: Joel, Emily and Julia.

He will be deeply missed by all who knew him and were touched by his curiosity and enthusiasm for life.

A memorial service is being planned at Columbia University for May 2007.

