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Martin Wilk remembered as 'the best statistician in Canada's history'

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Mark Twain was fond of the saying (which he attributed to Benjamin Disraeli), "There are three kinds of lies: Lies, damn lies, and statistics." That is, statistics are most useful as manipulative tools to prove or demonstrate an otherwise arbitrary speculation. Twain, of course, never met Martin B. Wilk.

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Like Twain, Mr. Wilk was a storyteller, one whose homespun truths and impeccable logic could cut through corporate or government bureaucracy and obfuscation. Also like Twain, Mr. Wilk was handy with a quip or aphorism. The real tools of his trade, though, were raw data, including samples, estimates and mathematical models.

He had a tremendous gift for blending cold facts into a cogent narrative that could predict the future, explain the past and help decision-makers, governments, industrial giants and common citizens make sense of our ever-evolving present.

His zeal to uncover the simple truths underlying much corporate or political blather made him a few enemies over his career, while earning him a far greater number of friends, fans and admirers. Mr. Wilk may not have been well

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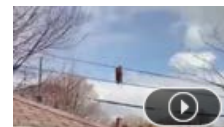
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known, even as chief statistician of Canada, but his accomplishments would have a significant impact on Canadian lives, and his influence was felt worldwide.

Martin Bradbury Wilk was born Dec. 18, 1922, in Montreal, and died Feb. 19 in Yorba Linda, Calif.

His academic career began with an engineering degree from McGill University in 1945. An early stint as a research chemical engineer on the atomic energy project at the National Research Council of Canada brought him into the Manhattan Project, the American effort to develop the first atomic bomb (with British and Canadian help), just as that world-altering experiment reached its zenith.

Mr. Wilk stayed with the NRC for five years before returning to academia at Iowa State University, where he received his PhD in statistics in 1955. Research and teaching assignments at Princeton and Rutgers universities overlapped years of industrial work at Bell Laboratories, where he eventually became a director.

David Wilk described his father as "a man who knew how to listen. Like a receiver, he could absorb and process ideas from several different sources simultaneously."

Throughout this period, Mr. Wilk struggled as the primary caregiver to five children, while his first wife, Thora Sugrue, had a long struggle with cancer. As son David recalled, "Dad went to bed with a knot in his stomach every night because he didn't know how he'd make it through. He shielded us through those years, keeping us in a loving embryo."

Mr. Wilk regarded the often arcane field of statistics as a beautiful blend of science and art, and a way to bridge the gap between mathematical facts and human understanding. He believed in a practical approach to all problems, whether professional or personal, though he wasn't one to overlook the element chance plays.

Alex Wilk recalls receiving a T-shirt from his grandfather which read "Better To Be Lucky Than Smart," along with some advice: "This message has served me well in my life, and I hope it will for you too."

David Wilk (Alex's Dad) observes that his father was invariably both lucky and smart. "It was always clear to me that my father's 'luck' was really a function of his constant and clear-eyed engagement with problems, issues and ideas."

In 1970, Mr. Wilk joined the executive ranks at AT&T, at the time the world's largest corporation. He would ultimately rise to director of corporate planning, introducing management ideas and methods that would result in top-level changes in corporate boardrooms around the planet.

This success led to an invitation to return home to assume the leadership of Statistics Canada, then a flailing bureaucracy rife with low morale and in desperate need of a shakeup. His colleague Paul Reed (former director-general of research at Statistics Canada) described his friend as "the best statistician in Canada's history – one who swam against the stream."

In his zeal to access and provide reliable data in order to construct accurate narratives, Mr. Wilk encouraged research over a wide range of enquiry – a move not always popular with his political masters, or government bean counters who questioned the value of abstract knowledge.

Fortunately, as Mr. Reed recalled, Mr. Wilk was also "a brilliant tactician

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who knew how to phrase an enquiry or task to suit the needs of his bosses. He had a suggestion for just about everything, and it was invariably the right thing to do."

"Martin Wilk was not a physically imposing man," Mr. Reed recalls. "With his bushy mustache and broad smile he was often referred to as 'The Teddy Bear,' a nickname that encompassed not only his extraordinarily considerate and generous nature, but also his warm humour, unimpeachable integrity and ferocious intellect."

Ivan Fellegi, Mr. Wilk's colleague and successor at Statscan, recalls a manager who "would intuitively grasp new ideas, while challenging their authors to defend the depth and veracity of their work. "We argued relentlessly," he says, "which is how we became great friends. He was a remarkably confident man who inspired confidence in others. He could see to the heart of issues and people, bringing out the best in both."

The impression that comes across consistently, from both colleagues and family, is of a warm, funny and brilliant man loved by all who had the good luck to know him.

His daughter Kathryn recalls, "My father was the centre of my universe – always there, always loving, always teaching. He brought curiosity, compassion and genuine interest in what was happening with my life. He took pride in my accomplishments and made me feel like I mattered. He was the kindest, most positive person I have ever known."

During his years at Statscan, Mr. Wilk and his family lived on a farm west of Ottawa. Mr. Reed recalls the intense conversations he and his friend would enjoy during their long daily commutes – conversations that would often continue long after they had reached their destination.

Mr. Wilk was constantly reassessing the mission of the agency, along with new ways to collect, collate, test and properly utilize data for an increasingly complex society. A lifelong bridge-builder, he recognized the need to connect his agency with academia, business and the broader world. He viewed each relationship as a two-way street, in which Statscan provided useful service in order to acquire good data.

Mr. Wilk retired from Statscan in 1986, leaving an agency that, in Mr. Fellegi's words, "had lost its insularity, and was ready to adapt and change as required in a rapidly changing world."

Remaining active long past retirement, Mr. Wilk continued to consult for the agency. He also served as senior adviser to the Privy Council Office, and sat on several national commissions.

In addition to heading task forces on tourism data and health information, he was president of the Statistical Society of Canada and vice-president of the American Statistical Association. In 1999, he was made an Officer of the Order of Canada.

He and his second wife, Dorothy, moved to a farm outside Yorba Linda two years ago to be near his son David and his large extended family. After a lifetime of manipulating data, he took pleasure in walking his dogs and working with his hands, pitching hay for the cattle and rebuilding his tractor.

In his later years he remained devoted to applying science to the cause of human betterment, from contributing to Hillary Clinton's health care initiative to speculating on how equitably to distribute food and Western affluence to the world. As he wondered to Mr. Reed, "How do we get our institutions to understand the job is only half done when you've produced such vast amounts of goods and services but don't know how to get them where they need to go?"

Mr. Wilk was a lifelong source of quotable aphorisms, such as "Insight is

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generally more important than objectivity," and one that seems fitting now: "I think it's best if I stop here because I've already told you more than I know."

Martin Wilk celebrated Valentine's Day with his family, where his son David noticed him smile and quietly observe, "Isn't everyone beautiful?" The next evening he suffered a fall, from which he was unable to recover.

He leaves Dorothy, his wife of more than four decades; children Rebecca, Carol, David, Teresa and Kathryn; eight grandchildren and numerous great-grandchildren.

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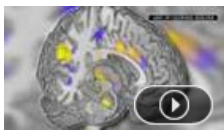


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