

## Samuel Devons: 1914-2006

Samuel Devons, founder of the Joseph Priestley Association and the Scientific Literacy Seminar at Columbia University, whose proceedings have been regularly reported in this Newsletter for many years, passed away on 6 December 2006, and his life was celebrated at a memorial service at St. Paul's Chapel on the Columbia University campus on 29 May 2007. Devons was eulogized by five professional colleagues -- Emeritus Physics Professor Frank Sciulli, Emeritus Slavic Languages Professor Robert Belknap, Emerita Italian Professor Maristella Lorch, Emeritus Journalism Professor Seymour Topping, and Emeritus Dentistry Professor Gideon Ehrlich -- and his four daughters, Sue, Judith, Amanda, and Cathryn.

Noting that a professor is someone who can hold forth on any topic for an hour and fifteen minutes, Sciulli listed four requirements of being a professor that Devons modeled: being at the forefront of research, teaching the young, stimulating colleagues, and accepting responsibilities. Belknap called Devons a scientist, scholar, teacher, and gentleman, who sought to bring minds from diverse backgrounds to interact toward solving a problem. Topping noted that Devons' service to Columbia did not end with his retirement. And Ehrlich said that Devons gave retirement his own definition, that his mind was as global as it was deep.

Devons' daughter Sue recalled how he had won a scholarship to Cambridge University, where he worked at the Cavendish Laboratory with Ernest Rutherford and J.J. Thomson. Judith recalled and shared her last conversation with her father in August 2006 -- on essays he wanted to see published, on combining the practical and theoretical in science. She also recalled that a physics professor in California had recently written to her father, 45 years after the event, for the opportunity to retake an exam and continue his career in physics. Noting that "Man is the master of the spoken word, and the spoken word is the master of man," Amanda recalled Devons' having teachers draw their images on mirrors to determine their size, an event she interpreted symbolically as his wanting people to be able to see themselves. She also recalled how her father was bent toward fixing things and reusing them rather than throwing them away. In wondering how she could summarize her father's life, she wondered how one could summarize the life of Benjamin Franklin, who, like her father, had been so purposeful in so many areas.