

Obituary / Nécrologie
Guy Ourisson (1926–2006)



Guy Ourisson. By courtesy of Bernard Braesch, Service de la communication, ULP, Strasbourg, France.

Guy Ourisson was born on 26 March 1926 in Boulogne-Billancourt and passed away on 3 November 2006 in Strasbourg. After studies at the ‘École normale supérieure’ in Paris, he obtained the *agrégation* in physical sciences (1946–1950), which was followed by two PhD degrees, both in terpenoid chemistry, a field that retained his interest during his long career. The first one was earned in 1952 at the Harvard University with L.F. Fieser on the *Oxidation of Δ^7 -stenols/Oxidative cleavage of tertiary alcohols*, and the second one in 1954 at the Sorbonne in Paris with G. Dupont on *Studies on rearrangements and stereochemistry in the longifolene series*. In 1955, at the age of 29, he was appointed as a professor at the University of Strasbourg, to which he remained faithful throughout his scientific career. In 1995, he became emeritus professor, but continued to share his knowledge and experience with enthusiasm until his death.

Guy Ourisson occupied a very special place among organic chemists. From the beginning of his career, he embraced an interdisciplinary approach to his science. He was always on the borderline between chemistry,

biology, and geology. Starting from the chemistry of natural products (organic synthesis, structure determination, reaction mechanisms), he devised new approaches for the solution of biological problems (chemotaxonomy, biosynthetic pathways, dermatology, neurochemistry, molecular evolution and prebiotic life chemistry) and related geological processes (organic geochemistry of biomarkers). He was convinced that the solution to many problems was only possible through an interdisciplinary approach. He had a rich and diverse scientific output, with more than 400 publications, 25 review articles, and about 20 essays, among them many gems: cycloartenol as the sterol precursor in plants, triterpenoids of the hopane series as molecular fossils and biomarkers of an overlooked class of bacterial lipids, molecular evolution of biomembranes and prebiotic chemistry of isoprenoids. In nearly 50 years of activity, he trained more than 100 PhD students and welcomed to his laboratory about 180 post-docs and co-workers of about 40 nationalities, who subsequently spread the influence of his school throughout the world.

It is not surprising that his outstanding talents and scientific activity were recognized by many honours and distinctions. He was awarded 25 scientific prizes from French and foreign institutions and made doctor *honoris causa* of the *Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule* in Zurich, professor *honoris causa* of the Shanghai Institute of Organic Chemistry, member of the 'Académie des sciences' (France), *Academia Leopoldina* (Germany), *Academia Europaea* and European Academy of Arts, Sciences and Humanities, foreign or corresponding member of the Academies of Sweden, Denmark, India, Luxembourg, Serbia, Rhineland-Westphalia and the American Academy of Arts and Science and honorary member of the chemical societies of Belgium, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and Bulgaria. He was also 'commandeur de la Légion d'honneur', 'grand officier de l'Ordre national du Mérite', 'commandeur de l'Ordre des Palmes académiques' (France) and received the Order of the Sacred Treasure (Gold and Silver) from Japan.

Guy Ourisson displayed an inexhaustible energy. The list of the responsibilities he assumed (CNRS, INSERM, Ministry of Research, Ministry of Education, OECD, European Science Foundation, NATO, IUPAC, Council of Europe, RIKEN, etc.) is too long to be cited in its entirety. In 1959, he founded the 'Groupe d'études de chimie organique' (GECO) on the model of the Gordon Conferences, which was instrumental in propagating a new and modern approach to organic chemistry, both in teaching and research. He also established the 'Fondation nationale Alfred-Kastler', in order to facilitate and improve the welcome of foreign researchers to France, and became its president. During his long term as regional editor for *Tetrahedron Letters*, he dealt with more than 10,000 manuscripts. From 1955 until his

death, he was consultant for many French and foreign companies (Organon, Ugine-Kuhlmann, Roure-Bertrand, Hoffmann-La Roche, Elf, Merrel-Dow Synthelabo, Transgene, Institut français du pétrole, Rhône-Poulenc, Compagnie générale des eaux—Vivendi). He established many forums and conferences aimed at bringing together young researchers from various disciplines and countries, such as *Scientia Europaea*, a forum of scientists under the age of 40 in physics, chemistry, and biology. In 1971, he was one of the founders of the 'Université Louis-Pasteur' in Strasbourg and, as its first president, was instrumental for its future development. From 1981 to 1982, he assumed the responsibilities of 'directeur général des Enseignements supérieurs' at the French Ministry of Education. From 1985 to 1989, he succeeded Sir Derek Barton as director of the 'Institut de chimie des substances naturelles' (CNRS, Gif-sur-Yvette, France). He was elected vice-president of the French Academy of Sciences (1998–1999) and was its president from 2000 to 2001.

To be useful to others was a leitmotiv of his whole life. This ensured him the respect, admiration and friendship of all those who met him. We already miss him a lot.

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