

Obituary for former UC San Diego Chancellor and National Science Foundation Director William D. McElroy

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OBITUARY FOR FORMER UC SAN DIEGO CHANCELLOR AND NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION DIRECTOR WILLIAM D. MCELROY

William David McElroy, the fourth chancellor of the University of California, San Diego, and a research biologist who made groundbreaking discoveries in bioluminescence, died today of respiratory failure at Scripps Memorial Hospital in San Diego, Ca. He was 82.

The UC San Diego campus was only 12 years old when "Bill" McElroy assumed leadership on Feb. 1, 1972, coming from the National Science Foundation in Washington, D.C., which he had directed for nearly three years. He served as UC San Diego chancellor until he resigned in 1980 to return to research, writing and teaching biology.

University of California President Richard C. Atkinson, who followed McElroy in 1980 as chancellor said "Bill McElroy was a good friend, a brilliant scientist, and a major reason for UC San Diego's evolution into the great university it is today. His vigorous leadership during UC San Diego's formative years, particularly his success in forging links between the campus and the community, has earned him a prominent and permanent place in the University's history. I owe him a special debt for his counsel, support, and friendship during my tenure as chancellor.

"Bill's intellectual achievements exemplify the creative fire that has made UC faculty renowned throughout the world. Among his enduring legacies is the pioneering work he conducted on bioluminescence 40 years ago, which continues to bear fruit in research performed today on AIDS and other diseases. He was an extraordinarily gifted man who will be greatly missed."

UCSD Chancellor Robert C. Dynes noted, "Bill McElroy was a gifted man of extraordinary distinction. His research led to new medical diagnostics; he directed the nation's two most prestigious scientific bodies; he led the fledgling UCSD campus during a critical time of its growth, and was beloved as a caring, humane person. He leaves an enviable and well-deserved legacy."

Although his research and training were scientifically-based, McElroy encouraged expansion of the arts, humanities and social sciences at UC San Diego, already known for its scientific strengths. He established the Board of Overseers, a group of San Diego leaders who advise the chancellor, and greatly increased the university's outreach to the San Diego community.

The UC San Diego research budget went from \$40 million when McElroy took over as chancellor to more than \$120 million when he resigned. Among other projects, construction of the Geisel Library an enduring architectural

landmark for the campus, the Gildred Cancer Center, and Mandeville Auditorium was completed, and planning for the Birch Aquarium was underway.

As a researcher, he was best known for isolating and crystallizing the compounds that enable a firefly to light up, and for his subsequent research into bacterial bioluminescence that resulted in nearly 200 original scientific articles.

McElroy traced his interest in the luminescent bugs to his graduate student days when the insects, attracted by the light of his cigar, began whacking into his face. He wanted to know why fireflies wasted so much energy to produce light, something that seemed unusual in nature.

After years of research, he concluded that it gave them an advantage in mating. He was the first to isolate the firefly enzyme and along with his late wife, biochemist Marlene DeLuca, the two became pioneers in the field of bioluminescence.

In 1989, thirty years after this research at Johns Hopkins, McElroy led a team which created four different colors of glowing bacteria by transplanting into them genes from a Jamaican click beetle, a relative of the firefly. McElroy's lab, the Analytical Luminescence Lab, sent more than 350 copies of the gene to researchers and biotechnology companies throughout the country.

McElroy was born in Rogers, Tex., in 1917. He received a bachelor's degree from Stanford University in 1939, where he played right end on the football team in 1938 and 1939.

He obtained a master's degree from Reed College in Oregon in 1941, and a doctorate from Princeton University in 1943. All degrees were in biology and biochemistry. He was the recipient of twelve honorary degrees including those from the University of Notre Dame, Johns Hopkins University, the University of San Diego and the University of Bologna in Italy.

McElroy served two years with the U.S. Office of Scientific Research and Development following graduation from Princeton. He then joined the faculty of Johns Hopkins University in 1946 and was director of the McCollum-Pratt Institute for twenty years and chairman of the university's Department of Biology and from 1956 until 1969, when he was nominated by President Nixon to head the National Science Foundation.

From 1975-1976 McElroy served as president of the 116,000-member American Association for the Advancement of Science, succeeding anthropologist Margaret Mead.

In addition to publishing numerous scientific articles, McElroy served as editor of two scientific journals, authored "Cell Physiology and Biochemistry," and co-authored nine scientific books including "Modern Cell Biology."

McElroy served as a consultant to the Atomic Energy Commission and on numerous national boards, including the President's Science Advisory Committee (1962-1966), the President's Committee on the National Medal of Science Award (1972), and The Conference Board and the Nutrition Foundation both headquartered in New York. He was a member of the National Academy of Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, Phi Beta Kappa, and several other national scientific societies.

Memorial services are pending.

He is survived by his wife, Olga Robles McElroy, of San Diego and his sister, Lola Rector of Pismo Beach, Ca. He and his late wife, Marlene DeLuca, who died in 1987, had one son, Eric McElroy, of San Marcos, Ca. He also is survived by the children of his first marriage to the deceased Nella Winch: Mary McElroy of Boston, Ann McElroy of Hickory, N.C., Thomas McElroy of Glen Arm, Md., and William McElroy of Woods Hole, Mass.

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