

In Memoriam: Dr. Robert Woodrow – Contribution by Dr. Gena Hahn

Remembering Robert Woodrow

September 2025 (Vol. 57, No. 4)

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“Robert Woodrow was one of my best friends as well as oldest – we met in 1975. There will be many words written in his memory, about his mathematical legacy, his contribution to mathematics education and to the CMS. I will avoid these topics, with one exception. Robert’s work, with Alistair Lachlan who supervised his PhD thesis, on (ultra) homogeneous structures is fundamental. Others will say more. I will not touch on Robert’s many other aspects that I had the pleasure to observe or share with him.

It is three in the morning. Voices are raised, an argument to save the world, again, in full action. The next day our hair will hurt after all the wine and cognac consumed over a long and excellent dinner we had spent the day planning and making.

Such were the times, in recent years unfortunately rather rare, with Robert Woodrow whose birthday present to me, two days early, was to die. He is not forgiven.

When we met as graduate students at SFU, it was over food and wine. I worked as a waiter in a French restaurant at the time while working on my MSc, he was on his PhD. He showed me Ramsey’s theorem over beers and taught me about compactness. He told me about a number theory assignment he had done as an undergraduate by proving the result from Peano axioms. We started inviting friends and colleagues for dinner. Many-course dinners that we would think about for days before finally getting down to cooking. Shopping at five for a dinner to begin at seven allowed the guests to marinate and not be too critical. There would be a starter, a fish course, a meat course, salad, cheese, desert. Decent wine, what we could afford; prices were lower then, not only absolutely but relative to salaries. I remember buying a bottle of Rémy Martin Louis XIII for 50\$, as opposed to some 5000\$ today. Robert being Robert usually insisted on making each portion as if it were the only dish we ate. We were young then.

We continued to eat together, visiting three-star restaurants together, exchanging plates halfway through so we could taste everything. We bought wine together, in France, often as futures. I might never be able to drink a Richebourg or a Clos de la Roche again at today’s prices. I am, unhappily, finishing the last bottles without Robert – 1975 Château Chalon from M. Perron, gold medal, 1999 Gevrey Chambertin Grand Cru from M. Geantet-Pansiot, 1999 Chambolle Musigny from the same. Robert is jealous.

We worked together. Our papers from the 80’s were written, in great part, in the kitchen with a glass of wine, in the living room with a glass of scotch, in good restaurants over good meals. Like the idiots we were, we often solved the problem, wrote nothing down, and had to repeat the exercise a year later. On one problem it happened twice. I still have two papers to finish that he will not help with.

We will all remember the cheerful person, often smiling, not suffering fools gladly, generous to a fault. Many a time we would go out for dinner with a group of people and when people started calculating how much each spent once the bill arrived, one of us would get fed up and pay the lot. He more often than I, sometimes we shared. Robert was very generous to his students and colleagues, with his knowledge, his wisdom, and his hospitality. Discussions in his house were always animated (though alcohol infused). I cannot imagine him having enemies, but not abiding fools might have given him some. Let them rest foolish.

Robert is no more, but he will live in our memories. Many a glass will be raised to him throughout the world, and it ought to be something good. A Richebourg, a Montrachet, a Lagavulin or an Octomore, perhaps an XO, be it cognac or Armagnac. Please, no blended scotch or brandy.

Here is to Robert.”

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