

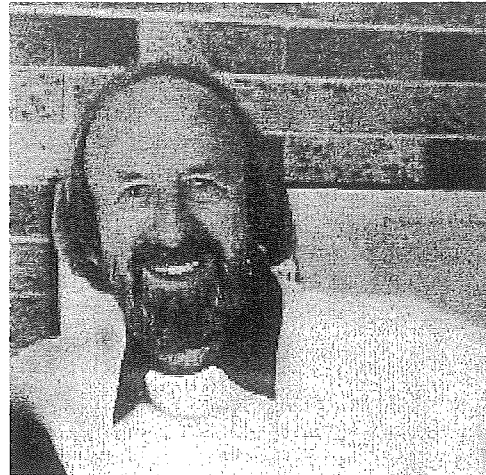
obituary

Wilton Willis

Wilton Willis was a CAFCA member well nigh continuously from 1982 until his death in July 2006, missing only the few years when the family was living in Australia. His wife, Helene, told me, after his death: "He always read Watchdog from cover to cover and we often discussed the articles". He was an active member and regular donor to CAFCA and he made a point of attending my meetings whenever I spoke in Auckland in recent years. In 1993, when I did my first national speaking tour, Wilton organised my public meeting and local newspaper interview in Warkworth (the Rodney Times gave me the front page lead) and I had the pleasure of being hosted overnight by his family. My deepest condolences to Helene and their kids, and my admiration to Wilton for a life well lived. It is entirely due to people such as him that this country became and remains nuclear free. For that alone, he deserves the gratitude of us all. MH.

Wilton Willis cut a striking figure, always impeccably dressed even when he was in casual clothes, his beard carefully trimmed, and his voice deep. He was 80 when he died but I doubt he ever saw himself as getting old and the last time I saw him a few months before his death, he seemed as energetic as ever even if his speech was a little slower on account of a small stroke. Wilton never lost the sense of urgency for putting our world to rights and would make his case so firmly that some found him overwhelming. But looking back it was a small price to pay alongside his great contributions. To me he was a warm and loyal friend who offered support and encouragement especially when I was a spokesperson for Auckland Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in the 1980s and early 1990s. He was also a stalwart supporter and participant in the activities of the East Timor Independence Committee and the Indonesia Human Rights Committee.

I didn't get to know Wilton Willis properly until the early 1980s, although our paths must have crossed earlier. Wilton was one of the founding members of the Auckland Peace Squadron established in 1975 and we must have attended many of the same meetings as sea and land protests against visiting US warships were being planned. Our daughters attended the same city kindergarten and we quickly found that we were fellow anti-Springbok tour activists unlike most of the other parents! It was lovely to get to know Wilton's beloved Helene, daughter Madeleine, (same age as my Jennifer), and the twins who were then babies: Fraser and Conrad. Wilton has a daughter, Sarah, from a previous marriage and four grandchildren. Many years ago



he suffered the tragedy of losing a son, Martin who was killed in a traffic accident in his late teens.

Wilton's anti-war commitment was forged from direct experience. He was born in Whitburn, County Durham, in the UK, and moved with his family to Cornwall around the time of the outbreak of war. At 16 he had won a scholarship to attend an art college but chose instead to serve in World War 11 and joined the Royal Fleet Auxilliary as a midshipman. He was profoundly affected by the death and destruction he witnessed.

Wilton was very proud of having taken part in the first anti-nuclear march held by CND from London to Aldermaston* in 1958. The CND symbol was launched at this march and Wilton held it dear and liked to ensure that people knew about its meaning: the semaphore signs for N and D in the circle of the world, white on black for hope over despair. * *Aldermaston, in Berkshire, the headquarters for Britain's nuclear weapons programme and the target of a series of famous CND marches in the 1950s and 60s, the Aldermaston marches. Ed.*

Wilton came to New Zealand in the 1960s after spending some time in Australia where he had been involved in the Australian Aboriginal Advancement League. He came to New Zealand as the Chief Executive Officer of Monier and I am told he was responsible for introducing New Zealand to the concrete roof tile industry. Later he was able to step into a lighter role as the International Projects Manager for Monier and was able to work from home giving him time to do more political work. Peace stalwart Lynn Hume applied for the job as his secretary. She remembers the hectic days when they worked together and she would be firing off a letter of protest to a politician one minute and a

business letter the next!

A Founder Of The Peace Squadron

The Peace Squadron was the brainchild of George Armstrong, a lecturer at St Johns Theological College, who recalls the first meeting of the Squadron in the lounge of theological students. An "unbelievable" number of people turned up and everyone was brimming with ideas – how would it ever be pulled together into a coherent activity? George says he cannot remember a time when Wilton was not part of the action – he worked hard and expected others to do the same. The Peace Squadron suited him because it gave him the chance to do his own thing as the skipper of his boat while at the same time working as part of the team.

There is a famous photo of Wilton at the helm of his boat "Shiralee" in front of the US nuclear submarine "Pintado". The "Shiralee" (from an Aborigine word meaning "tether") had other important peace uses too – Wilton hosted many an international guest on the Waitemata Harbour. In the 1980s Helen Clark accompanied a prominent Swedish peace advocate on one such sail. The peace movement nationally had a huge growth spurt in 1983 – spurred on by the warmongering of the Reagan era (*Ronald Reagan was the Republican President of the US from 1980-88. Ed.*) and the visit of internationally famous Australian peace activist and writer, Dr. Helen Caldicott. Wilton was a key member of Auckland CND but he was also at the forefront of the work to build better co-ordination among the disparate peace groups such as the formation of the Auckland Peace Forum. Lynn Hume was the first chair of that coalition. Some of the vital strategising took place in the lounge of the Willis home in George Street.

Wilton wasn't too keen on the informal "no leaders" style of organisation and at the time I tended to agree that we needed more structure and accountability. However, looking back there were some stunning achievements in terms of mass mobilisations – Queen Street marches of up to 20,000 at the time of US warship visits. However did we do it? I think a key ingredient was the inspiration of the Peace Squadron and the undoubted courage of skippers like Wilton.

Businessman or not, Wilton formed close friendships with the lively Leftie political and artistic community in Mount Eden and was a deep admirer and good friend of the late Pat Hanly (*famous artist and peace activist. Ed.*). Wilton could never accept the compromises that his erstwhile Labour friends made when they took office – be it Rogernomics or the ongoing entanglements with the Western military alliance. He was a passionate opponent of New Zealand's participation in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. He would often ring me to expostulate about the latest "treachery" but would never give up. Working with Helene, yet another letter would

be sent off to the New *Herald* and to the appropriate politician.

An Activist Until The End

In the late 1980s Wilton and Helene moved to Australia for a time but in the early 1990s they returned to New Zealand and settled in Warkworth. There Wilton was the inaugural President for the Warkworth Branch of Grey Power. Helene took on the challenge of managing Presbyterian Support Services in Warkworth. Helene and Wilton were active in the Alliance and subsequently became active Green Party members.

For the last several years Wilton and Helene have been living in Birkenhead on Auckland's North Shore, not too far from their now grown children. Wilton never stopped being an enthusiastic Peace Squadron activist – in 2002 he was out protesting at the entrance to the Viaduct with other veterans including Barry Littlewood and George Armstrong about the participation of the French boat "Areva" in the America's Cup races. Areva the corporation, largely owned by the French Atomic Energy Commission (CEA), is the outcome of a company merger involving both the plutonium reprocessing and nuclear reactor industries.

Helene chose a venue in the Viaduct Harbour for the celebration of Wilton's life so we could see his special Waitemata Harbour as we toasted his memory and watched the sunset. Wilton's close friend Ray Bradley, a retired Philosophy Professor, gave a moving testament, which opened my eyes to some of Wilton's interests that I would have liked to have explored with him further. He described Wilton as a "multi-faceted" man – a "veritable diamond" who had so many divergent interests and was devoted to so many causes: "The pursuit of international and social justice was just one of them. His pursuit of knowledge was another. He had an insatiable appetite for it; knowledge of the history of ideas, and of how they influenced social and political movements; knowledge of contemporary political institutions; knowledge that eventually made him the scourge of many politicians – some of them his erstwhile friends".

Ray spoke of Wilton's membership of the Rationalist Society and the NZ Astronomical Society. "His reading interests were extraordinarily wide and at the time of his passing his copy of Engels' 'The Family, Private Property and the State' was beside his bed as he reread parts in preparation for a discussion with one of his dearest friends". I will miss this wonderful member of the peace, justice and human rights family and I extend my condolences to his family. **Friedrich Engels, 1820-95, partner with Karl Marx as the 'fathers of Communism'. They co-authored 'The Communist Manifesto', among other books. Ed.*