



## **William B. Provine**

February 19, 1942 – September 8, 2015

Dr. William B. “Will” Provine was born February 19, 1942 in Nashville, Tennessee, the fourth of five children. He and his family moved to a farm in Brentwood, TN in 1951 allowing him expanded opportunities to explore the natural world with the encouragement of his family. As a young man he had interests in mathematics, snake catching, caving, abstract thought and logic, and played a terrific game of tennis. He earned a B.S. in Mathematics (1962) from the University of Chicago where he played varsity tennis and participated in intermural sports and competed at a national level in white-water kayaking (continuing later in his early years as a professor). After teaching middle school science for two years, he returned to the University of Chicago to earn a M.A. (1965) and Ph.D. (1970) in the History of Science from the University of Chicago. The chair of his thesis committee was Allen Debus who had launched the history of science program at the University of Chicago, though the deepest impact on Will during graduate school was his thesis committee member Dr. Richard Lewontin, a famous population geneticist who shared Will’s interest in the history of science and philosophy, and who fostered Will’s interest in evolutionary biology. Will joined the Cornell faculty in 1969, after a year of teaching at Wayne State University. He was a historian of evolutionary biology and population genetics and a passionate teacher and lecturer throughout his career. He rose through the academic ranks to become the Charles A. Alexander Professor of Biology at Cornell prior to being named the Andrew H. and James L. Tisch Distinguished University Professor at Cornell in the later years of his career. He had appointments in the Departments of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, History, and Science and Technology Studies. He retired in 2011 and was granted emeritus status at Cornell.

Professor Provine was an expert on the history of evolution and genetics and published several seminal books in the field, notably his Ph.D. thesis, "The Origins of Theoretical Population Genetics" (1971), and his scientific biography of Sewell Wright (1986). These two works defined Will's stature as a remarkably astute scientific historian, one who taught many young evolutionary biologists much about the origins and implications of ideas in their discipline. During his career at Cornell, he mentored 13 Ph.D. and numerous Master's students from diverse backgrounds but with the stipulation that they had to understand both the history and the underlying science of the field they studied. Some stayed with the history as academics, while others pursued science, medicine, science policy, computer science and other fields in their subsequent careers, all encouraged by Will to follow their own interests. In his final several years he became convinced that the core population genetic concept of genetic variation randomly "drifting" towards fixation or extinction over time (so called random genetic drift) was wrong. His last publication, "The 'Random Genetic Drift' Fallacy", was a self-published book where he detailed his arguments. It will be for a future historian of science to evaluate Will's contribution to this aspect of the field of evolutionary biology.

At Cornell, Will developed a number of popular courses, including his non-majors class on Evolution, which consistently drew hundreds of students. Will, an outspoken atheist, enjoyed sparring with students who questioned his Darwinian beliefs; he treated them with respect and encouraged them to engage in such debates. He had a dramatic and entertaining lecture style that drew students in. He had a joint appointment with biological sciences and eventually moved his office to Corson-Mudd Hall, in part to find more space to house his unparalleled collection of offprints of articles on biology that grew to over 400,000 separate documents as well as many rare books. (In McGraw, his third-floor office had required extra support for his bookshelves.) Those offprints and books, which he gathered from retired biologists and from their estates and purchased from booksellers, served as irreplaceable sources for his scholarship, and one to which he freely shared access with interested students, colleagues and visitors. Many of these are now housed in the Cornell Library Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections.

Will was honored with Cornell's Clark Distinguished Teaching Award in 1988, was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2006 and of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1986. In 2011, he was awarded the inaugural David L. Hull Prize by the International

Society of History, Philosophy and Social Studies of Biology, and The Darwin Award by the Society for the Study of Evolution in 1996. He received a Guggenheim fellowship in 1984.

Will loved a good debate and being a provocateur about evolutionary biology, religion and “free will”. A firm atheist, he argued strongly, but always politely, that believing in both evolution and religion was illogical. He was a strident critic of creationism and intelligent design. He was fond of saying “You have to check your brains at the church-house door if you take modern evolutionary biology seriously.” Will was insistent: there was no God, no life after death, no free will for humans, no foundation for ethics, and no ultimate meaning in life. Interestingly, however, his views on free will seemed to his philosopher friends to be grounded less in technical philosophical and scientific arguments than in a deep moral abhorrence of the idea of retributive justice. Whatever his views about ethics he was deeply motivated by compassion. He also said “if you’re an atheist and know you’re going to die, what really counts is friendship.” And Will was the warmest and most generous and kind friend you could imagine.

He loved his farm in rural Marathon, NY, where he had a remarkable library of books and scientific papers and correspondence that he used in his studies of the history of ideas and the scientists involved in evolutionary biology and population genetics. His farm also included a collection of old tractors and even a bulldozer that he fixed up and used around the farm (including digging a spectacular pond, which provided a wonderful respite from the heat of summer weather). With his first wife Marie and their sons Charlie and Stuart he rehabilitated injured birds and orphaned baby animals, including opossums, raccoons, owls, and song birds. The menagerie also included snakes, lizards, and turtles that Will and Marie caught and cared for. Will had a passion for old Volvos, which provided mostly reliable family transportation.

In 1995, Will was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Surgery and chemotherapy helped prolong his life. He survived much longer than anyone, including himself, imagined that he would, persevering with his teaching and lecturing until a year or so before he died. Will died on September 1, 2015 at age 73 at his home in Horseheads, NY due to complications of his brain tumor. His many colleagues, former students, friends, and even his opponents in debates regarding religion mourn the passing of this kind, generous, passionate, and fascinating man. He is survived by his wife Gail Light Provine, his sons Charlie and Stuart, his former wife, Marie Provine, his brother Robert Provine, and two sisters, Harriet Provine and Tina Johnson.

*Charles "Chip" Aquadro (chair), Mary Beth Norton, Richard  
Newell Boyd*

