

Alan Ruffman – Laing Ferguson Distinguished Service Award

Alan Ruffman was a talented polymath who developed and promoted advancement of geoscience and throughout his long career made its implications clear to the general public. Endowed with a deep curiosity, and with a sharp mind able to identify important opportunities, Alan has been a central figure in the growth and popularization of marine geoscience in Atlantic Canada. His work is widely known and influential both nationally and internationally: a remarkable achievement for someone who has not had a university, government, or corporate employer to pay his expenses. He has always had to hustle to get his science done. At the same time, many of us know Alan as a community activist: he has a strong sense of what makes a community and what is needed to maintain one. He was always a perceptive, kind, and generous supporter of the under-dog, be they students or under-appreciated scientists.

As an undergraduate at the University of Toronto, Alan had summer field experience in the Canadian Shield, which helped him later recognise the significance of the Tangier dykes and encourage local specialists to work on them. He then got an NRC graduate scholarship for an M.Sc. at Dalhousie with Mike Keen, attracted by the presence of the Bedford Institute of Oceanography (BIO) and the chance to sail on the research vessel Hudson. The experience convinced Alan to devote his career to marine geoscience. In the 1990's, Alan discovered and mapped the sediment layer on the Burin Peninsula produced by the 1929 tsunami and he recorded oral histories of the event. This early work was very influential for the thorny question of distinguishing tsunami from storm deposits. It resulted in several highly cited papers. Alan became interested in paleo seismicity as reported in historical records, for example discovering that the tsunami created by the 1755 Lisbon earthquake reached the coast of Brazil. His skills were applied to the Halifax explosion and the tsunami it produced; the sinking of the Titanic, the rescue effort from Halifax; the impact of the Saxby Gale; and the history of ice in the Gulf of St Lawrence. He wrote a well-regarded popular book on the sinking of the Titanic. Additionally, Alan was determined to identify a baby who was lost in the disaster. With another scientist, Ryan Parr, he discovered through DNA analysis and extensive research that one of the three unidentified babies lost on that dreadful voyage was Eino Viljami Panula from Sweden. Magda Schleifer, whose DNA provided the link, had a great aunt who was the mother of Eino Viljami Panula. On learning this, Magda Schleifer came to Halifax and visited the grave of Eino. Alan's talk at an AGS Colloquium about this remarkable forensic deduction, generated widespread interest coupled with some amazement.

Alan's publication record has clearly focused on tsunami understanding, mainly the 1929 Grand Banks Burin Peninsula event, a topic which he and collaborators approached from many directions; deposit recognition, their landscape dependence, propagation and height modelling, microfossil content, historical document search, public consultation, and even including personal visits to geology departments, museums and libraries on both sides of the Atlantic, including South America. An impressive citation count on his tsunamis work alone stands at 400, most notably for his contrasting geo-phenomena from tsunamis versus storms.

Alan Ruffman was an active member of the Atlantic Geoscience Society almost since the Society's birth in 1972. He consistently attended the annual colloquia, where he invariably gave an inspiring and entertaining talk on a range of unusual and thought-provoking topics that always generated much discussion. One of Alan's talents was that he was a gifted speaker, always in command of his subject and, answering the most difficult queries skillfully and with aplomb.

(compiled from several letters of support)