

Notes on the Life of Sydney A. Asdell

by Robert H. Foote
2006

A summary of Dr. Asdell's career is given in the biographical sketch. Although the biography reveals that Sydney Asdell was a scientist with many talents, it does not fully convey to the reader what an intellectual giant that Dr. Asdell really was. He was one of the last of the world's masters of the broad field of reproductive physiology.

He was highly trained in languages in the British tradition. His English was impeccable. He administered the French language examination when Cornell University required Ph.D. students to pass examinations in two foreign languages. His knowledge of the history of science was encyclopedic. He considered Marshall's classic

“Physiology of Reproduction” and Aristotle’s “Generation of Animals” to be among the greatest books ever written on the subject of animal reproduction. There were many good books in the 2000 years intervening and Dr. Asdell was familiar with the important ones. It was this ability and knowledge that made it possible for him to compile and comment on the basic features of reproductive anatomy and physiology in all mammals in his book “Patterns of Mammalian Reproduction” published in 1946. In 1964 he published a second edition in which he presented a massive compilation of reproductive information. In 1993 Dr. Ari van Tienhoven and colleagues expanded the book

called “Asdell’s Patterns of Mammalian Reproduction” to include non-mammalian species.

Coverage of subject matter in his advanced course in Physiology of Reproduction was equally comprehensive, covering oysters to otters and mice to men. Before beginning a lecture that included oysters he would stimulate the imagination of the students by asking a question such as “Now why do think an oyster would want to change sex?” His lectures frequently included a bit of “dry” English wit that sometimes escaped his audience, probably to his disappointment. His stories about the facts he uncovered, but didn’t publish, in studying inbreeding in royal families, were stated in an equally humorous but respectful manner.

Dr. Asdell was very careful in his studies with animals to have proper controls whether it was with rats or cattle. In the 1940s many studies published on fertility problems in cattle were case reports or on treated animals only. Dr. Asdell collected Holsteins from farms that were reported by the owner and veterinarian to be sterile. He housed the animals at Cornell under good management conditions. Eventually, he and his colleagues (Drs. Fincher, Smith and Elliot) administered hormones in an attempt to restore fertility. In the treated group 43% conceived and had calves. With a sly smile he said “unfortunately, I made a ‘mistake’ and included a random sample of the cows that were not treated.

In these controls 50% conceived and had calves.” My, how the controls helped to evaluate the ineffectiveness of the treatment.

Dr. Asdell was a fiscally conservative scientist who did excellent research with a keen mind and a low-cost laboratory. Also, he was concerned about the rising costs of administration. He was familiar with Parkinson’s Law (Parkinson’s Law and Other Studies in Administration by C. Northington Parkinson, 1957). This law was deduced from a study of the British Admiralty and of the British Colonial Empire at a time when the fleet and empire were decreasing. The law was stated as follows: “The growth of an administrative staff will invariably

prove to between 5.17 percent and 6.56 percent irrespective of any variation in the amount of work (if any) to be done”.

Dr. Asdell decided to determine if this law also applied to a university. He studied the growth of Cornell University from 1912 to 1958. During that time the number of undergraduate students doubled, graduate students increased 9-fold, and the administration increased over 10-fold. The annual rate of increase in administration was about 5.1% compounded, close to the 5.17% lower figure compiled by Parkinson.

One of the major efforts in applied research by Dr. Asdell was to secure funds to purchase a small mobile home and convert it into a laboratory. (See accompanying photo of Dr. Asdell and the lab.) A team visited dairy farms with severe reproductive problems. The dairyman, local veterinarian and extension agent were contacted to arrange for a visit. Usually Dr. Asdell, Dr. Hansel, Dr. Foote and Dr. McEntee, from Cornell, would visit the farm as a team covering male and female reproductive physiology and veterinary medicine. Beside examining cows and collecting semen for study we brought back cervical swabs and blood and feed samples. Most of these data were published only in experiment station bulletins.

Many of our days out with the mobile laboratory were long. One time it started to snow in January as we finished visiting farms in the Malone (northern New York) area. Dr. Hansel and McEntee drove back in a car. Dr. Asdell and I drove back in the Jeep hauling the mobile laboratory. Dr. Asdell started driving very cautiously as snow gradually accumulated. Hills were beginning to be a problem when only driving at 20 miles per hour at the base of the hill. So I suggested to Dr. Asdell that by this time he surely would like a break. He agreed (reluctantly I believe). I accelerated to about 40 miles per hour. That speed was just enough, with the 4-wheel drive Jeep, to get us over hilltops. Dr.

Asdell kindly was very quiet. When we pulled into Cornell at 2 a.m. all he said before departing for home was “Well, we made it!”

Dr. Asdell retired on June 30, 1965. He moved to Maryland with his son, Phillip, and daughter, Mary. He died February 21, 1987. Following his death, friends of Sydney Asdell and his children contributed to an endowment that provides funds to bring to Cornell distinguished scientists to give the Sidney A. Asdell Lecture on some cutting-edge research in reproductive physiology.

It was a privilege to know this quiet gentleman and scholar.

Robert H. Foote

NOTE: *Additional information is in a 26 page transcript and audio tape of an interview concerning animal reproduction conducted by Ari van Tienhoven, November 18, 1978. This is in the Cornell University Library Archives, call number 13-6-1985. The complete citation is “Sydney Arthur Asdell oral history, #13/6/1985. Division of Rare Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.*