

University of California: In Memoriam, 1997

Kenneth V. Thimann, Biology: Santa Cruz



1904-1997

Professor

Professor Kenneth V. Thimann, one of the world's leading botanists, died peacefully at his home on Wednesday, January 15, 1997 at The Quadrangle, Haverford, Pennsylvania, following a long illness. He was surrounded by family members and friends. He was 92.

Professor Thimann was a pioneering researcher in the field of plant physiology. He was best known for describing the functions of hormones in the control and development of plants. In particular, he identified the first growth hormone, auxin, and characterized its chemical structure. It was a discovery of seminal importance to the agriculture and horticulture industries, as well as a major contribution to our basic understanding of plant development and physiology. He continued his investigations of the functioning of plant hormones for the next 50 years, long after his official retirement. He was one of the few physiologists who had the breadth and vision to lead the way in attempts to understand the integrative role of hormone action in the life of the whole plant. During his scientific career he trained a large and distinguished group of graduate students who now hold important positions at institutions throughout the world. He wrote or co-authored about 300 research papers and several books. *The Life of Bacteria* (1955)

was an influential contribution to microbiology; *Phytohormones* (1937), co-authored with FW Went, and *Hormone Action in the Whole Life of Plants* (1977) are considered landmarks in the development of modern botany.

For his contributions, Thimann received the prestigious Balzan Prize in 1982, an honor awarded yearly in areas not covered by the Nobel Prizes. "The impact of [Thimann's] discoveries on agriculture and horticulture cannot be overestimated," wrote the Balzan Prize committee. "The elucidation of the way in which individual [plant] hormones act in connection with other hormones present is considered as one of his greatest achievements. He is also an inspiring leader of more than a generation of botanists and is regarded as the doyen of a line of research that has revolutionized plant physiology."

Thimann's numerous other honors included membership in the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and international scientific societies in England, France, Germany India, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, and Romania. He held honorary degrees from Harvard University, the University of Basel in Switzerland, the University of Clermont-Ferrand in France, and Brown University. The degree from Brown, awarded in 1989, included a citation that read, in part, "As a statesman of science, and one whose own discoveries have had far-reaching application to the feeding of our planet, we honor you today for your achievements both human and humane."

Kenneth Thimann was born in Ashford, England, on August 5, 1904. He earned his B.Sc. and Ph.D. in chemistry and biochemistry from imperial College, University of London, and a diploma from the University of Graz, Austria. He taught at the University of London for several years before coming to the California Institute of Technology in 1930 as an instructor in bacteriology and biochemistry Thimann joined the faculty of Harvard University in 1935 and remained there for 30 years. He was director of Harvard's Biological Laboratories from 1946 through 1950 and was Higgins Professor of Biology from 1962 to 1965. He also was a technical consultant to the U.S. Navy during World War II, working with the Navy's operations research group in Washington, D.C., London, and Pearl Harbor.

In 1965 Professor Thimann moved west at the urging of UCSC's founding chancellor, Dean McHenry, to become professor of biology at UCSC and the first provost of Crown College. He was the chief architect of the biological sciences at this fledgling institution, and as an early dean, was responsible for appointments in all other fields of science as well. He guided the shaping teaching programs, and obtained early systemwide approval for a Ph.D. program in biology. UCSC honored Thimann's pioneering contributions to his field and to the early growth of the campus by renaming its first

biological sciences research facility Natural Sciences 1, for him in 1972. At Crown College he assembled a distinguished and diverse group of faculty fellows, which held him in high regard as a true Renaissance man and scholar. He was a renowned lecturer, patient and encouraging to students at all levels, with a genuine interest in their careers. Without doubt he was one of the most successful college provosts. During this period of political and social unrest, he was often able to defuse potentially disruptive situations by using a combination of humor and calmly reasoned argument. His graceful, optimistic manner won him the respect of faculty, students and staff; after his death one of the stalwarts of the stenographic pool in biology spoke for many when she said, "It was an honor to have worked for him."

Among Professor Thimann's most noteworthy contributions to the campus was his nurturing of the UCSC Arboretum into an internationally known botanical collection. He chaired the chancellor's committee on arboretum and plantations for 15 years and helped to launch the Arboretum Associates, a community support group, in 1977. He was a broadly cultured man whose enthusiasm for life often took him beyond the sciences. A trained musician and accomplished pianist, he founded the Crown Chamber Players with his wife, Ann Mary Bateman Thimann, a skilled weaver who died in 1987.

Professor Thimann retired as provost in 1972 but remained active in research and university affairs for many years. He moved to Haverford in 1989 to be near his three daughters: Vivianne Nachmias of Philadelphia, professor of cell biology at the University of Pennsylvania; Karen Romer of Providence, Rhode Island, associate dean for academic affairs at Brown University; and Linda Dewing of Providence, an artist and businesswoman. He is also survived by six grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

Charles Daniel