

Victor Von Brunn (1934–2008)

Victor von Brunn, polar scientist and for 32 years lecturer, senior lecturer and associate professor in the Department of Geology on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of Natal, died suddenly in February in the city of a heart attack.

Matriculating from Vryheid High School, Von Brunn graduated from the University with an arts degree in 1956, majoring in German and Afrikaans/Nederlands. However, he was so inspired by the single course in geology which he did towards that degree that he went on to the University of Cape

Town where he acquired a BSc Hons in geology. This qualified him for appointment as professional officer of the First South African National Antarctic Expedition (December 1959 to January 1961) based in Queen Maud Land, Antarctica. (There must have been something in his genes because his grandfather, Dr Victor von Varendorff, had gone to Greenland as ship's surgeon with a German scientific expedition in 1908).

In Antarctica Von Brunn was responsible for the disciplines of geology, glaciology and geomagnetism. He spent the long Antarctic night in a hut buried under deep snowdrifts. His daily duties involved glaciological observations and the maintenance of geomagnetic instruments set up in another hut 200 metres away, free from any magnetic field interference from objects at the main base. During the summer months he carried out geological and glaciological work in the mountain area south of the base.

He was especially interested in the Aurora Australis, which he studied with the aid of an all-sky camera. These photographs enabled him to watch the development of this remarkable phenomenon over the whole area of the Antarctic sky. In 1961 Von Brunn was stationed at the Magnetic Observatory in Hermanus and in 1962 was awarded a CSIR grant to continue his analysis of geological and glaciological data under Professor Eric Simpson of the University of Cape Town. This came to fruition in an MSc degree (1963). In the same year he was awarded the South African National Antarctic Medal.

Geologists face the extremes of cold and heat. Between 1963 and 1967 Von Brunn was attached to the Chamber of Mines Precambrian Research Unit doing geological investigations on the fringe of the Namib Desert, research submitted for his PhD degree (1967), also from UCT. The following year he began his long association with the University of Natal.

At the time of his appointment Von Brunn was the sole member of staff of the geology department in Pietermaritzburg. He was assigned the task of expanding it up to graduate level, a status reached in 1973. He taught practically all spheres of geology up to third year level, but from 1977 onwards specialised in sedimentology, which he taught at honours level. Beyond that, he supervised nine masters and doctoral students and was the examiner for a number of others, not only at his own university but at the universities of Cape Town, Witwatersrand and the Orange Free State.



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Besides his Antarctic experience, Von Brunn travelled widely. In his student years he had participated in a private expedition to central Africa to familiarise himself with the African Rift Valley and to ascend the Nyamuragira volcano. He spent time in the geology department at the University of Western Ontario and visited geological institutions in Australia, Britain, Canada, Chile, France, Germany, Korea, Norway and New Zealand. He was invited to be a member of the Norwich Spitsbergen Expedition of 1979, his participation involving the study of glaciers and glacial processes on the Svalbard Archipelago in the Arctic.

Von Brunn's list of publications in his CV housed in the University of KwaZulu-Natal Archives runs to an astonishing four-and-a-half pages of small type. It includes contributions to 10 books, 27 full-length articles in specialised journals, eight published reports and 26 articles in conference proceedings, published abstracts and excursion guides.

Von Brunn was a devout churchman, a member of the Lutheran Church of the Cross in Hayfields. It was here that his well-attended funeral service was held. Among the several tributes paid was that of Dr Owen McGee formerly of the Department of Geography. He and Von Brunn had joined the university at much the same time as young lecturers. As McGee's field was physical geography, specifically meteorology, and the departments of geography and geology were adjacent to each other, they had much in common professionally and a close personal friendship developed. McGee's expression of acute loss at Von Brunn's death was a widely-felt sentiment.

Von Brunn was married briefly earlier in his life to a woman much younger than himself but had no children. He is survived by the partner of his later years, Elize Osborne, and a large circle of friends.

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