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BILL MILNE, NAVAL ARCHITECT 1928-2006

Designer of icebreakers and research vessels set up a program in naval architectural engineering at Memorial that is still the only one of its kind in Canada

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The dog was often the first to appear at the classroom. Then an aroma of pipe tobacco indicated that William Joseph Milne, known affectionately to his students as the Skipper, was about to appear.

Naval architect Bill Milne was one of Canada's leading designers of icebreakers and research vessels when he left his Montreal practice at German and Milne in 1979 to enter academia. He moved to Memorial University in St. John's, where he set up an undergraduate program in naval architectural engineering -- still the only one in Canada. The new generation of marine architects and engineers he taught and inspired hold positions in the marine and offshore-oil industries across the country and around the world.

Still in touch with each other because of the family-like environment he created for the department, Mr. Milne's former students love to reminisce about his in-depth knowledge of the shipbuilding industry, his nurturing teaching skills, his ever-present bow tie and pipe and, most of all, the dogs that were his constant companions.

Ivan, a golden retriever, regularly sat in on his lectures and often ones in neighbouring classrooms as well. Bill even took his dog on plane trips, says Neil Bose, a Memorial professor who taught in his department. "One time he was returning home from somewhere and switching in Halifax, but fell asleep. Ivan, the dog, flew on, but Bill did not." The professor's wife was surprised to find the dog at the airport and wondered where her husband was.

Stories abound about Bill Milne's standard-dress bow tie, tweed jacket and khaki pants (worn even when pursuing his outdoor passions for canoeing, hiking and cross-country skiing), his hospitality (the roast beef dinners at his Newfoundland home in Torbay were legendary) and his apparent disorganization (his files were in grocery bags on doorknobs in his office, but he could always find what he wanted, says one former student). But his place in the shipbuilding firmament is secure, first because of the vessels he designed -- the *Limnos*, for example, has been involved in fisheries research since 1968 -- and secondly for the Memorial program, which continues to breathe new life into Canada's faltering shipbuilding industry.

Mr. Milne was the fourth generation in a line of shipbuilders and designers. His father, W. Harold Milne -- recruited from Britain to help the Canadian government's efforts in the First World War -- served as a hull surveyor for the Imperial Munitions Board from 1917 to 1919. He was operating manager of the Saint John Drydock when son Bill was born in 1928. He went on to become a partner in the Montreal firm later known as German and Milne, which designed vessels for the Canadian government and private companies. His son would eventually join him there. During the Second World War, Ottawa called again on the father's services, appointing Harold Milne technical adviser to the director-general of the Naval Shipbuilding Branch for a token salary of \$1 a year.

Bill Milne was the youngest of three children of Harold and Eleanor Mary (nee Gilhooly) Milne, an

amateur artist. His sisters were prominent in their own fields. Eleanor was chief government of Canada artist for more than 30 years and her carvings and stained-glass windows can be found in the Parliament buildings. Barbara and her husband Martin Lambert were both architects.

After taking pre-engineering at McGill University, Bill Milne received a degree in naval architecture and marine engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His student jobs, at a dry dock in Holland and on an Athabasca River tugboat, reflected his love of things that float. After graduation, he took a management trainee position at a naval architectural firm in Newcastle-on-Tyne, England. Leaving the office there as often as possible, he fraternized with the men on the docks and credited their input with shaping his future designs.

"When my father was in his last year at MIT he wanted to do a paper on icebreakers," says Mr. Milne's son Geoffrey. "So he wrote to several individuals in many different countries he had heard were experts on the subject and asked who he should talk to. They all said 'Your father.' "

Bill Milne joined his father at German and Milne in 1953, where he worked on research and patrol vessels, package freighters, ferries, tugs and icebreakers. He had a role in preliminary plans for a cutting-edge nuclear icebreaker to protect Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic, but Ottawa never had it built. He personally designed and supervised construction of the RCMP vessels Wood and Fort Steele, the research vessels Dawson, Parizeau, Vector, Limnos and Maxwell, and the tugboats Brochi and Vachon. He also designed a number of ferries for St. Lawrence River crossings and worked on several projects involving hovercraft.

"Most of the research vessels built in Canada would have crossed his desk at that time," says John Carter, who worked at the firm for much of the sixties and seventies. He says Mr. Milne often avoided meetings with co-workers by slipping out a side door in his office. This earned him the nickname Houdini.

He was keen to work with others, however, on issues he felt strongly about. Mr. Milne served on a number of committees that lobbied for a school of naval architecture in Canada. And he was a member of the National Research Council advisory committee that chose St. John's as the location for an ice tank to test models of proposed vessels and offshore structures. The facility is now the centrepiece of the Institute for Ocean Technology. He also served on many inquiries into the loss of vessels at sea.

In 1979 he moved to Memorial as chairman of the new department of naval architectural engineering and as a professor, an unusual appointment for someone without a PhD. He directed the initial curriculum design, staff recruitment and equipment purchases.

His emphasis in training students was always on the safety of the people who would use the ships and on the responsibility of designers to make sure that their projects would actually work, says Dr. Bruce Colbourne, a former student who is now a senior research officer at the IOT.

Former students say Mr. Milne used his extensive contacts in government and industry to help them find the work-term jobs that were part of their co-op program. He was always available when they needed help, and he invited them to dinners at his home where they got a chance to schmooze with influential locals.

Mr. Milne retired in 1994, moving with his wife to a house at Farm Point, Que., that his father had

designed and lived in. He was soon involved with a group of local men who spent two mornings a week each fall cutting hiking trails from a nearby youth hostel into Gatineau Park. He took his own dog with him everywhere, and often ones he was minding for friends and neighbours as well.

"At times he was babysitting up to six dogs at once," says close friend Robin Williams.

Mr. Milne became an active member of the Unitarian Fellowship in Ottawa and played a key role in one of its causes: lobbying on behalf of Samsu Mia, a Bangladeshi refugee claimant who had taken sanctuary in the church. For nearly a year, Mr. Milne slept in the church one night a week, says Rev. Fred Cappuccino, the church's minister emeritus. That way, if police showed up to deport Mr. Mia, he could stall them until he had notified the TV news outlets. The efforts eventually succeeded. Canada's immigration granted Mr. Mia temporary residence just before Christmas in 2004.

The Gatineaus and the outdoor lifestyle played a key role throughout Mr. Milne's lifetime. As children, he and his sisters spent their summers there at an uncle's cottage. Eleanor Milne recalls making expeditions with her brother when they were both quite young, crossing a river and climbing a hill they dubbed Kilimanjaro.

Later he spent many active, outdoorsy weekends and vacations with his own family at the Farm Point house. He took his five children skiing, sailing, canoeing, fishing and skating and taught them to stalk deer, set traps, camp and survive in the wilderness. He also enjoyed birding, stargazing, leading singsongs and reading and collecting books, especially on naval history and the Arctic.

Mr. Milne was divorced from his first wife, Jill Thorogood, in 1974. In 1979, married Ruth Beebe-Center. His five grown children and her six all attended the ceremony in Massachusetts.

Over a number of Christmas vacations, Bill and Ruth Milne issued an invitation to students in the department to join them at a rented vacation house in New Hampshire. Sean Ireton, one of those who took up the offer, said the house would be filled with 30 or 40 relatives and friends.

Even in retirement, Mr. Milne continued to be active in industry associations. He was a founding member of the Marine Technology Society in Canada, an honorary life member of the Society of Naval Architects and Marine Engineers, a fellow of the Royal Institution of Naval Architects and a member of the Canadian Institute of Marine Engineering and the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Newfoundland.

William Joseph (Bill) Milne was born on June 3, 1928, in Saint John. He died on March 3 near his home at Farm Point, Que., as a result of a car accident. He was 77. At the time, he was driving to pick up his dog Orkney, which had wandered off. He leaves his second wife, Ruth Nicholson Milne; his first wife Jill Thorogood; his children Chris, Geoffrey, MerryJill, Joseph, and Jonathan; stepchildren Anne, Roxanna, John, Lowell, Horton and Walter; 13 grandchildren; and two sisters, Barbara Lambert and Eleanor Milne.

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