William Johnston Cocke III (1937–2022)

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On July 4, 2022, William Johnston Cocke III, a.k.a. “John,” passed on to his next great adventure at the age of 84.

John was born on October 13, 1937, in Asheville, North Carolina. He was a Fulbright Scholar and spent a year at the Universität München in 1959. His German remained excellent throughout his life; he and his daughter Caitlyn traveled through Switzerland and Germany in 2018, communicating solely in German for several months prior.

John’s academic journey also included being a Woodrow Wilson Fellow and National Science Foundation grant recipient. He went on to earn his Ph.D. in astrophysics from Cornell University in 1964 under Phillip Morrison. He then assisted with the invention of the GPS with the Navy as a civilian contractor in 1966. In August 1968, John accepted a position at Steward Observatory working under Bart Bok at the University of Arizona, from which he later retired after more than 32 years.

John is notably remembered for leading the team that discovered the optical pulsar in the Crab Nebula in 1968 (see Moments of Discovery: A Pulsar Discovery for more information).

John was also known for his calligraphy. He was a self-taught master calligrapher who received praises from a sofer. John spent 20 years, starting in the 1980s, hand-copying the Four Gospels as a study in calligraphy. This work was featured in the Arizona Daily Star as the first Biblical calligraphic work in English since the 1600s. He was loosely Buddhist and Christian with a generous side of Druidry, and he was a long-time member of the Johrei Fellowship.

John was a remarkable man known for his depth, kindness, and patience. He was brilliant, a naturalist with an eye to mycology, and he had a great sense of humor. While his mind was in the stars, his feet were often on a mountain. Together, the family traversed New Zealand’s volcano Mt. Ngauruhoe, atop of which he ate instant coffee crystals so as not to miss his midday caffeine. Later, he and Nathaniel took on Humphrey’s Peak.

John is survived by his wife Claire, two children Caitlyn and Nathaniel, his brother Stanley H. Cocke, and beloved grandchildren Patrick, Anika, Phobe, and Iris.

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See also Cocke’s AstroGen entry.