Academic pushed boundaries in science and art

Robert William (Bob) Gauldie, scientist, university administrator, painter and poet: b India. April 5, 1941; d The Netherlands. April 5, 2011, aged 70.

Bob Gauldie was an accomplished researcher and academic who built a reputation for pushing boundaries during a career which included more than 150 scientific publications, 113 of them in refereed journals.

He was also not afraid of pushing boundaries in his other great love, painting, with one work irking religious traditionalists and coming close to landing him in trouble with the law.

Following an exhibition of his paintings in 1965, Professor Gauldie was asked to paint the Stations of the Cross for Wellington Presbyterian church St Andrew's on the Terrace. The 14 stations tell the story of Jesus from his death sentence till his entombment, but those painted by Prof Gauldie and first shown at Easter 1967 caused a stir by depicting Christ as a 44-gallon drum. The Evening Post newspaper received several letters attacking the work as "blasphemy" and Prof Gauldie recalled in a posting on his website in March this year how a senior Wellington police officer warned he could be charged with criminal blasphemy, though in the end no action was taken.

In his March posting Prof Gauldie said using a 44-gallon drum to symbolise Jesus depicted the stations in a way that was "realistic in the religious sense". "As a symbol, they are ubiquitous, loud and associated with trash. They were ideal for my purpose to portray the Stations of the Cross as the brutal murder, the clangorous, violent trashing of Jesus; the reduction of all his teachings to a worthless and brutalised body that was empty of life."

Prof Gauldie was born in India, where his father was serving in the Indian Army, in 1941. After World War II, he lived for a short while in England before joining his father in Queensland, Australia. He spent several years as a technician in minerals exploration in outback Australia and came to New Zealand in 1967. He met his future wife, artist Gail Gauldie, in Dunedin and they married in 1968.

He graduated from Otago University with first class honours in zoology in 1972, winning a Proudfoot Junior Scholarship, a Commonwealth Scholarship and a University Grants Committee Postgraduate Scholarship. He joined the Fisheries Ministry's fisheries research division in Wellington in 1975 and in 1978 went to Vancouver on a National Research Advisory Council Fellowship, completing a PhD in 1982. It was during his time in Canada that Prof Gauldie started to paint seriously, under the influence of Canadian artist Alan Wood.

On his return to New Zealand, he resumed his work at the ministry before going to the University of Hawaii's Institute of Geophysics and Planetology as a visiting professor in 1989. In 1991, he joined the faculty as an associate research professor, continuing his work on the ageing of fish, but also working on light detection and ranging technology and the fate of plastics in the deep sea.

He returned to New Zealand in 1997 to work at the Institute of Geological and Nuclear Sciences, and in 1999 became Associate Dean of Science at Victoria University. He returned to Hawaii in 2002 as a full research professor. He was made an Emeritus Professor and retired from Hawaii in 2006.

Prof Gauldie made significant contributions to genetics, physiology, fisheries, crystallography and optics. His work in New Zealand in the 1980s revolved around population genetics with Peter Smith and methods for ageing teleost fish, the latter in collaboration with the late Graeme Coote, of the Institute of Nuclear Sciences, and Ian West.

He believed hypotheses were to be examined and tested by experimentation and evidence. Some found this rigorous challenging uncomfortable and confrontational, especially when it tackled received wisdom or ideas underpinning established management procedures. He was a force in any discussion, and those who could participate at the same high level regarded him a stimulating and exciting colleague.

Prof Gauldie died on his 70th birthday while visiting family in the Netherlands. His ideas and art continue to challenge - his 'Stations of the Cross' were exhibited at St Andrew's on the Terrace in the week before Easter this year, soon after he died.

IAN WEST AND MARTIN KAY.
Sources: Gauldie Family, Peter Smith, Denis Povey.