

NOS DISPARUS

Wilf Wakely

Wilf Wakely, most commonly pronounced *Wirofu Waekuri* in his beloved and enchanting Japan, died peacefully in Tokyo on February 2, 2021 after a two-year battle with brain cancer.

The loss of this foremost advocate of closer and more harmonious Canada-Japan relations brought much sorrow and grief to literally countless people, on both sides of the Pacific and across the globe, whose lives, in one way or another, had been truly enriched by him in his many roles and endeavours. Wilf was at times a comedian, a businessman, a bureaucrat, a diplomat, a community leader and a mentor, and much has been said and published elsewhere on that score. His achievements of high office in commerce and government and as a member of numerous board and trade commissions included postings with the Department of External Affairs, appointment as British Columbia's Trade and Investment Commissioner in Kobe, and appointment as president and chair of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce in Japan.

Wilf's entrepreneurial skills were honed at an early age. As a grade 10 boy at St. George's, he bought day-old pastries from a delicatessen shop on Dunbar St. on his way to school, and then at morning break he sold the pastries to the other boys. There would be quite a crowd around his locker. We understand that the headmaster was not impressed.

Wilfred Cowan Wakely was also a lawyer.

His appearance at UBC law school in 1977 as "a man with a plan" was like that of some exotic creature come among us. A YMCA exchange visit to Japan in 1965 when he was 15 years old had led, after his completion of high school in Vancouver, to a career as a highly popular commercial front-



man and comedian on Japanese television and ambassador positions at Expos in Osaka and Okinawa—rare antecedents indeed, even for the kaleidoscope of entrants to first-year law.

Wilf's charismatic allure allied with his natural cordiality and wonderful sense of humour soon found him many friends through the three years at law school. The firm bonds made with many of his classmates were so cherished and precious as to last until the very end, even until the final, eventually heartrending "Hey, bud" e-mail or phone call.

Wilf and Takako were married during the final year of law school, with delightful ceremonies in both Canada and Japan. Underlying all that followed was Wilf's dedication to his family: his devoted wife and their children, Tara and Conan, and their five grandchildren.

Following graduation and articling at what was then the firm of Ray Connell, Wilf was called to the B.C. bar in 1980. This was a time when the Japanese economy was performing magnificently and appeared ready to go into overdrive. Much Japanese investment money was seeking opportunities abroad. Many Japanese manufacturing companies were seeking foreign sources of supply—remember Quintette Coal? There seemed to be an endless horizon for legal work to service the needs of Japanese clients entering what was to them a foreign and relatively unknown legal environment. And Wilf Wakely would become the ideal lawyer to meet those needs—this, indeed, was his "plan". For those of us fortunate enough to witness the phenomenon, his capacity to put Japanese clients almost immediately at ease and have them gratefully repose in him their trust and confidence was a wonder to behold. His natural mien of intelligence, self-confidence and wit—which, with ever a twinkle in his eye, he never lost—and his effortless and eyebrow-raising fluency in the Kansai-ben dialect of Osaka combined with disarming effect.

Those were years of very hard work for a young lawyer with a young family. Yet, as a remarkable insight into his unique character, we note that somehow Wilf found time in the late evenings to retreat to his basement in his home in West Vancouver to build, to exacting maritime museum standards, a magnificent model of a North Atlantic salvage tug, the Foundation Franklin, whose deep-sea wartime missions from Halifax were the subject of Farley Mowat's *The Grey Seas Under*. Go figure. Not to mention that he obtained his private pilot qualifications to boot (in both Canada and Japan).

Wilf moved on to Davis and Company. In the mid-'80s, he accepted Department of External Affairs postings to Japan as press officer then legal officer, principally engaged in the redevelopment of the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo, and also dealing as liaison and translator for many visits by Canada's ambassadors to Japan. Here is Wilf's recollection of one such visit:

One of my responsibilities was to interpret for the ambassador. In my case, I was warned not to use my Osaka dialect, so I would try very hard to speak neutral Japanese. One ambassador was a big impressive man. At the end of every speech he would tell a joke—I never knew what it was going to be—and I found it really difficult to translate Canadian humour about Newfoundland or other nuances. One time, I really didn't know how to translate his joke, so I turned to the crowd and said in the thickest Osaka accent I could muster: "Ladies and gentleman, the ambassador has just said something incredibly funny so please laugh your heads off!" The audience exploded and clapped and the ambassador turned to me and said, "Great, we'll use that one next time!"

It was expected that Wilf's legal practice might yet be carried on in British Columbia. However, the collapse of Japan's asset price "bubble" in 1991 and the comparative retreat of Japanese interests to their native shores tilted the balance towards a career based in the land of the rising sun. Wilf and Takako with their two children moved to Japan in that year, and Wilf more or less underwent a "role reversal" of sorts. While representing British Columbia as Commissioner, Trade and Investment for the Kansai region (including Osaka, Kobe and Kyoto) in the '90s (including serving on recovery projects after the disastrous 1995 Kobe earthquake, which he and his family survived unscathed), Wilf's professional career now focused on assisting and orienting Canadian, U.S. and European individuals and companies to the complexities of Japan's legal and commercial systems and dealing with a multitude of cross-border issues. He was admitted to practise in Japan as a foreign law solicitor and became a member of the Tokyo Bar Association. He received the prestigious appointment to the Expert's Committee of the Japanese Investment Council. Wakely Foreign Law Office became associated with TMI Associates, one of Japan's top three law firms.

The eventual sale of their home in West Vancouver and the purchase of a delightful balconied apartment in central Tokyo, as well as a recreational property in Ryokan country, fully confirmed Japan as Wilf and Takako's permanent home.

Not all was affairs of state, international commerce and big business, or the glamour and conviviality of the Ginza izakayas or the Roppongi Hills Club. Wilf freely volunteered his legal services to the less fortunate and the needy, and he was a champion for those who were so unfortunate as to find themselves facing the truly uphill battle to retrieve children wrongfully abducted to Japan. He was a tireless and successful advocate of the rights of Canadians living abroad to vote in our federal elections.

Yet Wilf prided himself in his Canadian heritage (as well as his Irish heritage, becoming a dual citizen of Canada and Ireland in 1997). He was a frequent visitor to Canada and he maintained his Law Society of British Columbia membership throughout.

Wilf made his last visit to Canada in May 2019 to attend the 40th anniversary of the UBC Law Class of '79, to the surprise and unfeigned delight of all of his classmates. Despite the first signs of his inexorable decline, we found ourselves reacquainted with his bonhomie, wit and positive energy. We were reminded that our dear Wilf was a born comic and mimic, who was simply just such fun to be with. His fascinating range of facial expressions were able to convey delight, humour, irony, incredulity and, most rarely, scorn more than words. Unanimated, Wilf's visage in repose could seem as calm and as enigmatic as the Mona Lisa's—with glasses, of course!

In the sad vigil of his last years, Wilf was truly blessed by the support of Takako and their children and of his two sisters, Sue and Avis. Without him, they must now "soldier on", as Wilf would say.

One of Wilf's last wishes was to have his ashes scattered in the waters of Howe Sound, and arrangements are underway to have that happen, when the pandemic's international travel restrictions permit.

If it be thus, Wilf, if it be thus. Kampai, our Japanese maple!

David Lunny
