

## Obituary: Victor Milligan, 1929–2009

Most of us are thankful if we can excel in one field of endeavour, but the late Victor Milligan, who sadly passed away on 4 March 2009, was outstanding as an athlete, as a leader and as a civil engineer. Victor grew up in East Belfast, where his parents had moved from the Kilrea area. His father was a policeman, and even though the family were members of St Donards' parish church, Victor joined the 24th Boys' Brigade Company in Bloomfield Presbyterian church, which was slightly nearer to his home—8 Irwin Drive.

Victor excelled academically at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, where he won a scholarship to Queen's University. He also excelled as an athlete, and his leadership potential shone through as he was selected to be Head Boy. At Queen's he was awarded a first-class honours degree in civil engineering in 1951, and in the following year an MSc in the relatively new area of soil mechanics. After two years in industry in Scotland he accepted a King George VI Memorial Fellowship to Purdue University, USA.

He is perhaps best known in Northern Ireland for his athletics prowess, as he had become the country's top middle-distance runner in the early 1950s. Unfortunately, because of an injury, he was unable to compete in the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki but in 1954 he was captain of the Northern Ireland Empire (now Commonwealth) Games team in Vancouver. In the Mile of the Century Victor finished fourth behind Bannister and Landy (who both broke the four-minute mile), and overnight he became a household name in Northern Ireland. Victor could have gone on to even greater achievements but, shortly after, his athletic career came to an abrupt end when he suffered a serious climbing accident in the Great Tetons in USA. He was in a coma for weeks, and it was feared that he would never walk again. Fortunately Victor was nursed back to health by Mary Ann, who became his first wife and the mother of their two sons, Jeffrey and Michael.

Switching his focus from athletics to the civil engineering career he loved, he moved to Canada in 1956, and four years later, at the early age of 30, he established the geotechnical consultancy Golder Associates in Mississauga, West Toronto, jointly with Hugh Golder—one of the world authorities in this field. From 1960 to his retirement in 1995 Victor utilised his leadership skills, technical expertise and business acumen to lead this company into a position of world eminence. Golder Associates now has staff of over 7000 in 160 offices worldwide (including ten in the UK),



and it is now the largest geotechnical consultancy in the world.

As a geotechnical civil engineer his contributions have been acclaimed internationally for projects such as

- (a) the 13 km long Northumberland Strait Bridge from Prince Edward Island to the mainland, many other bridges and dock facilities
- (b) major tunnelling projects in soft ground in Toronto, the Atlanta Subway system, Melbourne Underground, Singapore Rapid Transit System, and the Caracas Subway in Venezuela
- (c) over 50 dams up to 200 m in height in North America, Greece and Australia.

Within the engineering profession in North America Victor was highly acclaimed. He was the founding editor in 1963 of the *Canadian Geotechnical Journal*, now one of the top three journals in this field in the world. He delivered the 38th Karl Terzaghi Lecture in 2002 in Washington, DC, and won the Sir John Kennedy Medal in 2005—the most distinguished award of the Engineering Institute of Canada

Throughout his career and right up to his untimely death Victor was honoured by various international organisations, and only three will be highlighted here.

- (a) He was awarded honorary DSc degrees from the University of Waterloo, Canada, in 1990, and from Queen's University, Belfast, in 1993. Victor had earlier given an outstanding Harry Ferguson Memorial lecture in 1984 at his alma mater, and in recent years he had been a generous benefactor to Queen's.
- (b) In 2001 he was elected an overseas Fellow of the Royal Academy of Engineering. This was an outstanding achievement, as fewer than 50 are elected each year (90% from the UK and only 10% from the rest of the world) – a clear recognition of his outstanding contributions to the engineering profession worldwide.
- (c) In 2005 he was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Institution of Civil Engineers (the oldest professional body

for engineers in the world)—the only person from Canada to be so honoured. Here it is interesting to note that Stephen Bechtel (former CEO of the Bechtel Corporation, the largest construction company in the world) is the only Honorary Fellow from the USA.

In spite of all this acclaim, Victor always remained modest and unassuming, but wonderful company.

Victor was a devoted husband to Mary Ann before she lost her battle to cancer in 1988, and to his second wife Babs, who succumbed to cancer in 2003. Victor visited Northern Ireland on many occasions, most recently in 2007, shortly after he married Donna, who had been Mary Ann's best friend. Had Victor lived until the autumn he would have celebrated 80 years, in addition to 50 years of Golder, the company he founded. Victor will be greatly missed by Donna, Jeffrey, Michael and their families. His classmates from 1951, his colleagues from Golder Associates and many engineers across the world mourn the passing of an outstanding role model for humanity.

#### **NOTE**

This obituary was first published online on [www.nce.co.uk](http://www.nce.co.uk)

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