

Don Cronkite, Renaissance Man

by Eva Dean '83 Folkert

His ties aren't, well, contemporary. His lapel pins can declare he's a "Peacemonger" or a "Cat-Hater."

Yes, he's a college professor.

He's portrayed Quaker-founder George Fox, founding-father George Washington, and genetics-finder Gregor Mendel. He's read "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" for the ballet piece in Hope's Dance XIII Concert and played Lord of Misrule for the music department's Madrigal Dinner.

No, he doesn't teach theatre.

He's taught classes about war and peace, creation and evolution, and science and human values. He's written articles on the Christian ethics of abortion and genetic engineering.

Nope, not a religion prof either.

How about this? His lab contains an "instant ocean" and an incubator where paramecium are cozy at 27 degrees Celsius. His classrooms can be boisterous bastions of the mitosis/meiosis square dance or an orchestration of the DNA Suite.

Dr. Donald Cronkite is a biologist. And an actor, Christian humanitarian, geneticist, peace activist and a paramecium researcher. Above all, he is irrepressible, a campus comedian, and a tremendously good teacher. And it's the teaching part that he cares about the most. For that, the class of 1988 gave him the H.O.P.E. (Hope's Outstanding Professor-Educator) Award last May.

"I refuse to let people put me in a box"

The many interests and activities of Don Cronkite, professor of biology and chairperson of the department, make him as easy to pin down as an aggravated Hulk Hogan. The standing question undoubtedly is, "Is there anything that *doesn't* interest Don Cronkite?" With so much on his mind, it should seem that his brain would explode. He's a complicated man with a simple mission in life.

"I refuse to let people put me in a box, to decide that I should be a certain person, believe in certain things, act a certain way because I'm a biologist and a Christian," says Dr. Cronkite. And so, he's always maintained that keep-them-guessing attitude. It makes for an interesting life style.

Dr. Cronkite's portrayals of famous men were acted out on the Hope stage for the history department's annual "Rendezvous With History," a unrehearsed, ad-libbing production of revived historical personalities (eighteenth century costumes, become him). His Hope committee work ranges from the A.J. Muste '05 Memorial Committee to the Religious Life Committee to the Women's Week Planning Committee.

Of course, many Hope professors have a variety of interests beyond their chosen disciplines. But Dr. Cronkite is different because his are so diverse and visible. At

least, it seems that way. If he isn't acting them out, he's writing them down. If he isn't researching it, he's teaching it.

"It's just a focusing problem," Dr. Cronkite admits about his spectrum of ideas and interests. "I know I should go home and read books about biology. And I've tried. I pick up a new biology book, get all excited about reading it, then I get home and find something else I enjoy. It is distracting, but I've come to like myself this way. It means that I'm not really good at one thing — and I feel I should be — but this is the best me I'm going to be."

Hope students like it that way, too. They marvel at the man's unrestrained energy. They wonder how this balding biologist can bounce around a classroom as much as he does and still ride his bike home at the end of the day.

"Dr. Cronkite really gets into teaching," says junior Angela Lumbert, a biology major and one of Dr. Cronkite's advisees. "He's a very energetic teacher and a very demanding teacher. He doesn't just stand behind the podium and recite facts. And he doesn't just give tests with true-and-false, multiple choice, or fill-in-the-blank questions. He gives essay tests."

Oh, no, the dreaded essay test. . . . even in biology. Dr. Cronkite does have a reputation around campus of being tough — but good.

"Without a doubt, Don has high standards," says one Hope colleague. "But he absolutely is a master teacher. I think every student at Hope should have Don for at least one class."

"To me, Don epitomizes the true sense of the liberal arts because he brings more than science into the classroom," says biology colleague Dr. Chris Barney. "...and, when we team teach Biology 111 together, I insist that I get to teach first. Because no matter how good I am, even if I'm at my best, I'd always look bad after him."

At this year's conference for new professors, Dr. Cronkite gave a workshop on "The Role of the Zany in Teaching." Who would know better?

It is an understatement to declare his teaching methods unconventional. He is probably the only professor on campus who gets his students to dance outside of the Dow Center studio. Square dance, no less. The mitosis/meiosis square dance.

"On one of those rare nights when I was reading a biology book at home, the author of this certain book called mitosis and meiosis (a complicated cell-dividing process which is the physical basis of genetic phenomena) the dance of the chromosomes. So I wondered, 'What kind of dance would chromosomes do?'"

A square dance, obviously. Choosing students who want to do the dance but pretend they don't, Dr. Cronkite gives each couple bandanas — red for one couple and blue



Professor Donald Cronkite as Quaker George Fox...

for the other couple in the square. Then he chants a square dance chant with mitosis/meiosis descriptions. Bow to your partner, begin the fission.

"I feel our teaching is the best when it's like our personalities," explains Dr. Cronkite. "My personality is undisciplined and unusual."

Some other Cronkite zaniness includes: the photosynthesis ballet, protein synthesis as a Burger King commercial, the playing of synthesizer music based on nucleotide sequences of DNA (the DNA Suite), and the measurement of the speed of nerve conduction by holding hands and tooting bicycle horns. Of course, he also gives any number of very traditional, fact-packed lectures, solves problems on the board, answers questions, administers exams, gives homework and turns in grades at the end of the semester.

Now, before too many people get the idea that Dr. Cronkite wears a big, red S — for Super Prof — under his button-down collar shirt and flamboyantly flowered tie (compliments of his seven-year-old daughter, Emily), it is reasonable to state that not every zany Cronkite method works. There was, after all, that stint with the five liters of "blood."

"One day I had to explain that the human body pumps five liters of blood a minute. I knew they would all write it down without any clear idea of how much blood that was. So I brought to class five liter flasks with red dye mixed in water. Well, I had it covered with a sheet of some sort, and when it was time for that part of the lecture, I whipped the sheet off and said something like, 'And this is how much blood your heart pumps a minute.' Immediately I heard the murmurs. Murmur, murmur, murmur. 'Was it real blood?' Then the question was, 'Where did he get it?' I never told them what it really was. But they were distracted and impressed with a different emotion rather than the fact. On the test, many people missed that question. You see, zaniness can be risky because the main point can get lost very easily."

Dr. Cronkite came to Hope in 1978 from California's University of Redlands where

he says he was encouraged to try anomalous classroom methods. He was also voted the Outstanding Teacher of the Year there in 1977 by the Mortar Board Society. There seems to be a correlation.

Outside of the classroom, Dr. Cronkite's researching passion is water regulation in paramecium, those single cell organisms which Dr. Cronkite thinks are, get this, "cute". Since his days in an undergraduate honors program at Indiana University, Dr. Cronkite has questioned the world of the paramecium. He enjoys his research for the same reason an artist paints — it's creative and extremely enjoyable.

"My mother could never really understand why I'd want to research paramecium. She's an accountant. Accounting is stable. You can always find a job as an accountant. So Mom finds it odd that I could make a living researching paramecium. Every time she visits she finds it hard to believe we live in a nice house."

For all his don't-take-me-too-seriousness, Don Cronkite is a passionate man — passionate about his work, his extracurricular interests, his family, his ideas on the Christian faith.

Still, the question remains. Is there anything Dr. Cronkite doesn't find interesting?

"Well," he declares in an instant, "I'm not very interested in accounting." ✍



... and Professor Donald Cronkite as himself.