

Kenneth Carpenter

Recipient of the 1993 US Department of Agriculture Atwater medal in recognition of his work on improving the diet of people around the world

Roger Carpenter

My father, Kenneth Carpenter, who has died aged 93, was an eminent nutritional scientist.

Born in London, Kenneth was the son of James, managing director of a chain of hardware shops, and Dorothy (nee George), a teacher. As a boy, he horrified his parents by wasting his pocket money – as they saw it – on collecting antiques; he had a particular passion for English Delftware, of which he later presented some specimens to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

He attended Merchant Taylors' School, London, leaving in 1941 with an open scholarship to Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, to study natural sciences, then a PhD at the Dunn Nutritional Laboratory (now MRC Human Nutrition Research), interspersed with war work on nerve gases. Characteristically, he combined all this with obtaining a first in economics as an external student at the University of London.

In 1945, he married Daphne Holmes. Three years later, he was appointed scientific officer at the Rowett Institute in Aberdeen. There he worked on the availability of energy and protein in animal feeds, and also enjoyed attending the local music hall, and sessions of all-in wrestling.

Our family returned to Cambridge in 1956, on his appointment as a lecturer and then reader in nutrition. In 1974, Daphne, my mother, died after a long and debilitating illness, during which Kenneth cared for her.

Following a year as Storer lecturer at the University of California, Davis, in 1977, he accepted an appointment as professor of experimental nutrition at the University of California, Berkeley. Meanwhile, he met Antonina (Nina) Borgman, a teacher, and they married and set up home permanently in Oakland.

An important area of his research both there and in Cambridge was how traditional methods of preparing such foods

as maize and bulgur affected their nutritional value. For his work on improving the diet of people around the world, he received the Atwater medal from the US Department of Agriculture in 1993.

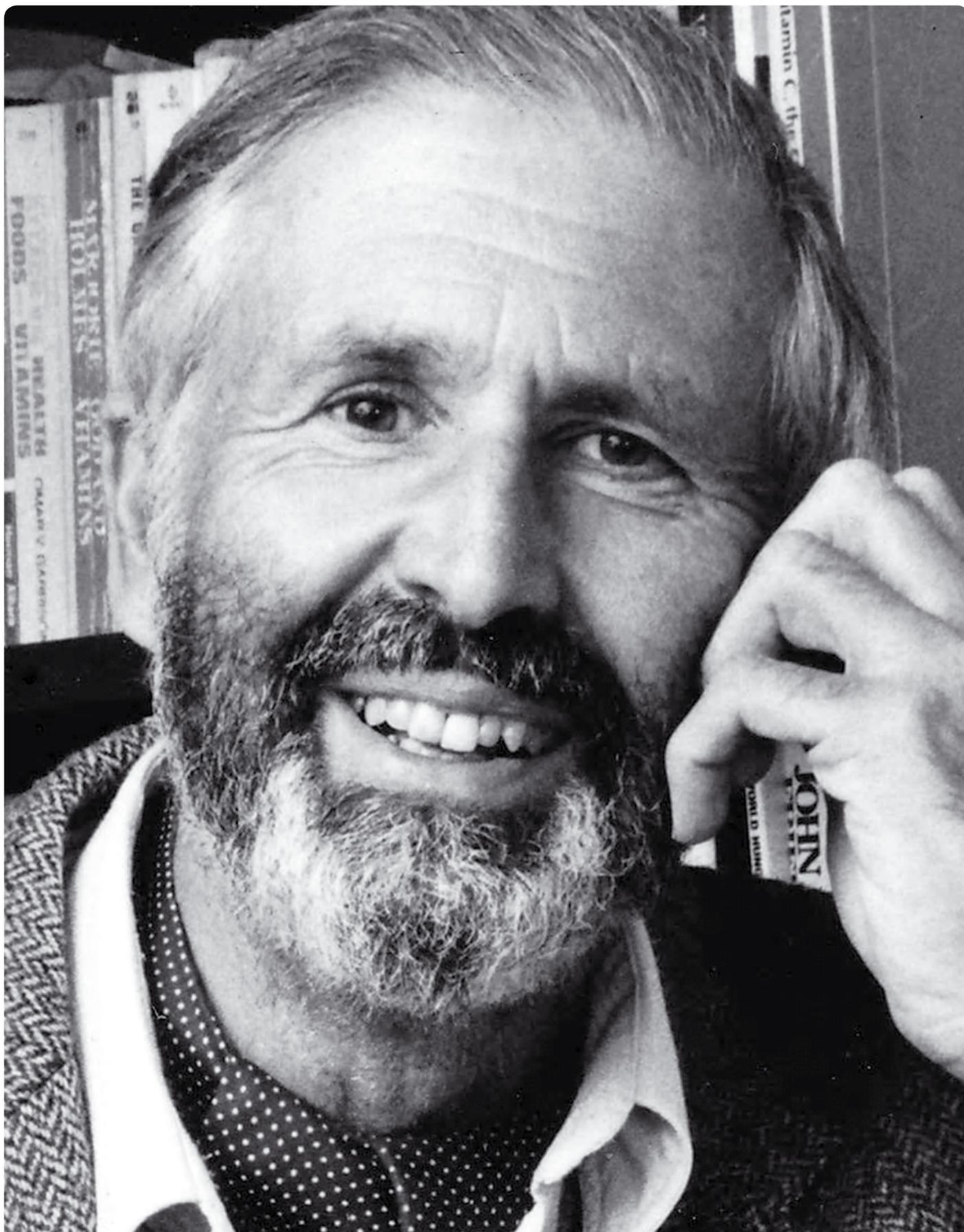
“His magisterial History of Scurvy and Vitamin C focused on a profound question at the heart of nutritional science”

Gradually, his interests began to move towards the history of nutrition. His magisterial, but also very readable, History of Scurvy and Vitamin C focused on a profound question at the heart of nutritional science: Why did it take so long to realize that scurvy was due not to a harmful agent, but to a dietary deficiency? Other books on protein and on beriberi (a disease usually caused by thiamin deficiency) followed.

Kenneth wrote with both elegance and clarity; his integrity and intelligence might have been intimidating had he not been so kind and supportive of his family, colleagues and the many students whom he encouraged and nurtured. He also had a strong social conscience, and in later years devoted a great deal of time to the mentoring of local disadvantaged students, helping them to obtain university places.

He is survived by Nina, me, his grandchildren and his great-grandchildren.

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Kenneth Carpenter became professor of experimental nutrition at the University of California, Berkeley