Philosopher Ian Hacking pondered the reality of particles and the labelling of people

Celebrated Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking is regarded for the breadth of his contributions, particularly in the philosophy of science.Handout

In the late 1960s, when Ian Hacking was teaching philosophy in Uganda, he was fond of piling his three young children into the family station wagon and taking them out on safari.

“That’s where he really got to explore his adventurous side,” said his daughter Jane Hacking, a professor of Slavic languages at the University of Utah

It was during one such trip, that the senior Prof. Hacking and his children approached a mother elephant too closely. What followed was a mad scramble to turn the car around and withdraw in the nick of time as they were chased by the elephant.

“As kids we just thought it was really exciting. Now you look back and think, what was he doing?”

It was a prudent retreat for the celebrated Canadian philosopher who was better known for his confident forays into matters as diverse as mathematics and madness, but who struggled at times with demons he could not outrun.

Prof. Hacking died of heart failure on May 10 at The Annex retirement home in Toronto. He was 87.

Widely regarded for the breadth of his contributions, particularly in the philosophy of science, Prof. Hacking received many accolades during his professional life, including the first Killam Prize for the humanities in 2002, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council gold medal in 2008, Norway’s Holberg Prize in 2009 and, in 2014, the Balzan Prize from the Zurich-based Balzan Foundation, then valued at over $800,000. He was named a companion of the Order of Canada in 2004.

“Ian was the colossus, the one we were all terrified of,” said Andrew Potter, author and associate professor of public policy at McGill University, who earned his PhD in philosophy at the University of Toronto in the 1990s, when Prof. Hacking was one of the school’s most internationally acclaimed faculty members.

But while Prof. Hacking could be intimidating and abrupt, he was also a generous mentor who, together with his third wife, Judith Baker, a professor at York University, hosted students, colleagues and visiting luminaries at the

couple's century-old brick three-storey on Markham Street, near the U of T campus. And he was supportive in other ways.

"Whenever Ian got a monetary prize, he gave a sizable portion of it to graduate students," said Cheryl Misak, a professor of philosophy and former vice-president and provost at U of T.

Ian Macdougall Hacking was born in Vancouver on Feb. 18, 1936. His father was a supercargo at the city's port and then a lieutenant colonel in the Canadian military who was awarded an OBE in 1945 for his service during the Second World War. His mother was born in New Zealand to Scottish parents who later immigrated to British Columbia's Okanagan Valley.

As an only child, Prof. Hacking felt the brunt of growing up with a father who was frequently away and a mother who was not pleased to be raising a son largely on her own, his daughter said. When he was eight, he was sent to boarding school for two years and later spoke about how miserable the experience was.

Mr. Hacking, in his home in Toronto in 2009, received many accolades over the course of his professional life, including the first Killam Prize for the humanities in 2002, and, in 2014, the Balzan Prize from the Zurich-based Balzan Foundation, then valued at over $800,000.JENNIFER ROBERTS/The Globe and Mail

By age 17, he was enrolled at the University of British Columbia, where he studied mathematics and physics, completing his bachelor's degree in 1956. He earned money during the summers working for the forest service in British Columbia, and later as a geophysicist trainee with Mobil Oil and Shell in Alberta.

Then came a turning point. Passed over for a graduate scholarship at UBC he instead won a Commonwealth scholarship to Trinity College at Cambridge University in the UK. The opportunity was life changing. Already interested in deeper questions arising from mathematics, he became a student of Casimir Lewy, a scholar of philosophical logic under whose supervision he earned his doctorate in moral sciences in 1962.

That year he met his first wife, Laura Anne Leach, a Halifax native, while travelling by ship from Canada to England. The couple were married and had a daughter (Jane) and son (Daniel) while Prof. Hacking was a research fellow at Cambridge. Another daughter (Rachel) was born after they moved to Vancouver where he took up an assistant professorship at UBC in 1964.

By then Prof. Hacking had begun his prolific run as an author of 13 books on philosophy and its intersection with other disciplines. Writing in a clear and penetrating style not typical for academics, he brought his analytical skills to bear on a wide range of topics, starting with *The Logic of Statistical Inference,* published in 1965.

"I was nobody in that world," Prof. Hacking later told fellow University of Toronto faculty member Ronald De Sousa in an interview. "But within weeks of that book appearing, I had some of the most serious, detailed letters that I've ever received in my life from the major figures in the field."

His reputation was growing abroad, but UBC proved a poor fit. Looking for new horizons, Prof. Hacking arranged a teaching secondment for himself at Makerere University College in Kampala and set off for Africa with his young family. While there, he forged a lifelong friendship the philosopher André Gombay, a future U of T colleague.

Following Uganda, Prof. Hacking was offered lectureship at Cambridge in 1969. But his marriage, already fraying in Africa, had come to an end. Ms. Anne Leach later remarried and lived in Oxford with her husband, an epidemiologist. While at Cambridge, Prof. Hacking met and married philosopher of science Nancy Cartwright.

The personal shifts precipitated the next phase of Prof. Hacking's career. After Ms. Anne Leach's husband was offered an academic position in California, Prof. Hacking and Dr. Cartwright followed, moving to Stanford

University in 1974.

“It was a sacrifice. He left Cambridge so that he could be near us,” his daughter said. “But he was as Canadian as they come, and he never felt at home in the United States.”

At Stanford, Prof. Hacking pursued his growing interest in experimental physics, spending time with researchers such as Francis Everitt, whose work involved testing Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity, and with whom he would go walking in the surrounding hills. While doing so, he was wading into a question that was then dominant in the philosophy of science: Are unseen entities such as electrons and quarks real, or are they products of the imagination, conjured up to serve theories that explain the behaviour of scientific instruments.

One of Prof. Hacking’s key contributions to the debate was the recognition that subatomic particles not only serve theoretical ends but are also manipulated by scientists to further their investigations of other phenomena. After learning of an experiment at Stanford that involved spraying electrons and positrons onto a ball made of niobium to detect the presence of fractional electric charges, Prof. Hacking famously wrote, “So far as I’m concerned, if you can spray them, they are real.” The line made it into his landmark book on the subject, *Representing and Intervening*, published in 1983.

It was a productive period, said his daughter, who recalled waking up to the clack of her father’s typewriter on mornings when she and her siblings were staying with him. At such times, the house in California was a flurry of activity, with goats and chickens in the yard and a garden that produced a bounty of vegetables. Prof. Hacking cooked enormous breakfasts and took his children hiking through the mountains or down to the ocean, chasing

whatever adventures he had in mind for them.

But at other times he would fall into depression and bouts of drinking, isolating himself from others and leaving the children to their own devices. His marriage to Nancy Cartwright ended. He formed a relationship with the philosopher Judith Baker, who was to become his lifelong partner and support system through his personal struggles. The two were married in 1983.

By then, with his children heading away to school, Prof. Hacking was on the move again. Following a year at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Bielefeld, Germany, he began teaching at the University of Toronto in the philosophy department at the Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology. U of T was to remain his home base for nearly two decades. He received the formal title of University Professor, the university's highest honour, in 1991.

Now in his 50s, he continued exploring areas of thought that were new to him, once writing: "I know many people who have been disciplined by disciplines. I mean, bullied by bosses who sternly strive to maintain pre-established institutional structures of inquiry."

Triggered by his interactions with sociologist Dorothy Smith among others, he became fascinated with the question of how individuals come to be categorized and how terms such as "juvenile delinquent" arise and propagate through culture. He used the term "looping effect" to describe how the act of putting people into a category, shapes how they are perceived and how they perceive themselves, which in turn influences their behaviour and alters the category.

"Done carefully, Hacking's kind of analysis enables one to trace the origins of a concept, track its various developments and document its impacts," wrote

Jack Kwong, a professor of philosophy at Appalachian State University in North Carolina and a former research assistant to Prof. Hacking, in a 2005 profile.

In *Mad Travellers*, published in 2002, Prof. Hacking developed this thinking on the subject by using an example from the late 19th century, when there was a rash of individuals who compulsively walked vast distances across Europe in a trance-like state. Drawing comparisons to more recent syndromes, he reasoned that some forms of mental illness are transient and arise in certain societies at certain times but not in others. A hallmark of his treatment of the subject was his nuance and care not to deny the suffering of those who were categorized.

"Ian was a complicated person," Prof. Misak said. "It gave him a great empathy for people who weren't seen as normal."

So deft was Prof. Hacking's ability to get at deeper questions underlying the labelling of individuals that he received two awards for *Rewriting the Soul,* his 1995 book on multiple personality disorder*,* one each from a pair of groups with diametrically opposed views on Freudian psychology. It was an irony that he found especially pleasing, said James R. Brown, a philosopher of science and professor emeritus at U of T.

In 2000, Prof. Hacking made one more professional move, becoming the first anglophone elected to a chair at the prestigious Collège de France in Paris, an academic title he held until his retirement in 2006. While spending time in Paris each year, he continued to live in Toronto and wrote into his 70s. His final book, *Why is there a Philosophy of Mathematics at All?* was published in 2014. That same year, Ms. Baker died of pancreatic cancer, a blow from which Prof. Hacking never fully recovered, his daughter said.

Driven by an indefatigable curiosity, Prof. Hacking made his mark across a

broad swath of philosophical questions with results that are neither formulaic nor easy to sum up, several colleagues said.

In his personal life, he fought a tougher battle with many setbacks, his daughter said, but he also experienced great joy.

“I think the greatest gift that he gave us is the incredible closeness we have,” his daughter said. “We did so much crazy stuff with him, we just bonded ferociously.”

In addition to his three children, Prof. Hacking leaves his stepson, Oliver Baker, and seven grandchildren.