

## Car crash tragedy

An accident last month killed two of Britain's most distinguished researchers. **Nigel Williams** reports.

A tragic car crash has killed two distinguished British researchers. Dame Anne McLaren and Professor Donald Michie died when their car came off the motorway between Cambridge and London last month. Anne McLaren was a leading geneticist who became the first female official of the Royal Society and Michie was a researcher in artificial intelligence who worked as part of the British code-breaking group at Bletchley Park during the Second World War.

McLaren was also a fellow of King's College and Christ's College, Cambridge, and a member of the Warnock Commission that advised the British government on ethical issues on the use of genetics.

Michie had helped to solve Tunny, a German teleprinter cipher during the war, and was director of the University of Edinburgh's department of machine intelligence and perception.

Anne McLaren was born in 1927, the daughter of Henry McLaren, second Lord Aberconway, and his wife Christabel. The Aberconways were industrial magnates known for their devotion to Liberal politics and women's suffrage.

She came to fame with work in 1958 with her colleague John Biggers at University College London, where they managed the first successful birth of mice that had been grown outside the mother's body for 24 hours.

This achievement represented a huge leap in understanding that led to the birth of the first test-tube baby in 1978. She became head of the Medical Research Council's mammalian development unit in 1974.

She was foreign secretary of the Royal Society from 1991 to 1996; president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1993; and Fullerton professor of physiology at the



**Accolades:** Dame Anne McLaren, who died with her ex-husband Donald Michie, had received wide recognition for her work. (Picture: © The Godfrey Argent Studio.)

Royal Institution from 1992 to 1996.

In 2001 she won an Unesco award for women in science and the next year was awarded the Japan prize, with Andrezej Tarkowski, for her contributions to developmental biology.

She was a key member of the Warnock Committee which laid the groundwork for the country's 1990 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act, an early initiative that has become an international model for defining ethical rules for human *in vitro* fertilisation and embryology.

Donald Michie made a contribution to three fields of research. Apart from his work breaking German codes in the Second World War, he

worked with Anne on pioneering techniques that were fundamental in the development of *in vitro* fertilisation. He subsequently became one of the founders of the field of artificial intelligence, an area to which he devoted the remainder of his career.

Owing to the recent declassification of previously secret documents, the significance of his work during the war has only recently become clear. He invented a technique for automatically decoding the Lorenz machine, used by the Germans — ultimately allowing decoding within hours rather than days.

After his retirement, he continued to work on projects investigating machine learning.