Adam Neville CBE was one of the most eminent civil engineers of the 20th century, described as ‘the ultimate global authority’ on concrete, the universal construction material.

He was born Adam Maciej Lisocki in Krakow, Poland, on 5th February 1923. He won a newly established British Council scholarship for an essay written in English at the age of 15, the prize being a trip to England. He had started school a year early and would be too young to matriculate, so he stayed in England alone to arrange to spend a year at school there. It was 1939, and because of the worsening situation in Poland, he returned home to be with his mother in case war should break out. When he was 16, fleeing the invading Germans advancing from the east, he and his mother (his father, a lawyer, having died when he was 12) tried to escape to Romania from where Polish Forces were being evacuated to France. The guide who had been paid to take a small group over the border was also in the pay of the Russians whose soldiers arrested the group and Adam and his mother separated.

At first, Adam was held in a prison in a cell so crowded that the prisoners all had to sleep on the concrete floor in a row on their sides facing the same way. Adam said later that
perhaps that was when he developed his love of concrete and his ability to sleep anywhere. The prisoners had fleas and lice and suffered from scurvy. He was later sentenced to a labour camp for the crimes of being a bourgeois and wanting to leave the Soviet Union, and sent in the infamous cattle trucks with no room to sit or lie to Arctic Russia. When they reached the end of the railway line, the surviving men were marched through the snow to their destination. If a man was dropped out of line, he was shot where he fell. The survivors spent 18 months cutting down the forest, carrying the logs on their shoulders. They had no gloves and no boots. Many died of cold, the snow, the hard labour and lack of food. Adam said some of the dying older men gave the younger men their food so that they might survive.

In 1941, following the Soviet amnesty for Polish prisoners, Adam made his way alone across Russia to Iran where, starved and ill, he recuperated and joined the Free Polish Forces under British Command, led by General Anders. He was reunited with his mother who had been sent to a collective farm and also made her way alone across Russia. She arrived first in Persia and knitted socks for the son she was convinced was still alive. She had been to university and studied pharmacy and so also joined the Free Polish Forces, serving as a pharmacist in the field hospital, rushing out every time an ambulance came in from the front to see if her only child was among the wounded.

Adam served in Persia, Iraq and Palestine, where he managed to matriculate, a prerequisite to becoming an officer. In January 1944, he embarked for Italy with the 2nd Polish Corps. He fought at Monte Cassino and the Liri Valley, and was decorated the Polish Cross for Valour and the Monte Cassino Cross. Adam never spoke of what he had experienced, except the odd story which he thought amusing. One of his stories told how the men slept under the barrels of the field guns which were firing constantly, as the most peaceful place because it avoided the air pressure of the recoil. It was of course the most dangerous place, being the target for German shelling. Adam’s dugout was struck by a shell and he was buried by earth from which he had great difficulty extricating himself, but lost one of his boots which was only retrieved the following day. His colonel was buried so deeply that Adam had to dig him out.

Following demobilisation at the rank of captain, Adam continued his interrupted education in England. Around this time, he grew his famous luxuriant handlebar
moustache which he kept for the rest of his life. In 1950 was awarded what his professor described as the best first class honours degree in engineering ever obtained by any of his students at Queen Mary College, University of London. This was quickly followed by a master’s degree and he became a lecturer at Southampton University. A year later, he took up an appointment as an engineer with the Ministry of Works in New Zealand and then became a lecturer at Christchurch University. In Wellington he met and married Mary Hallam Cousins and their two children, Elizabeth and Andrew, were born in New Zealand.

In 1955 Adam brought his family to the UK and became a lecturer at Manchester University, completing his London external PhD which, working with his usual speed and efficiency, he completed early and had to wait for the due date to submit it. He made time to serve as a Royal Engineer in the Territorial Army where he was proud to have been promoted to Major.

Adam had huge energy and a zest for life and he thrived on challenges. In 1960 he became the first Dean of Engineering at the Nigerian College of Technology in Zaria, Nigeria. It was then that he wrote his best known book, ‘Properties of Concrete’, published in 1963, which has sold over a million copies, been translated into 13 languages and is known to generations of students and practicing engineers as the ‘Concrete Bible’ - the Fourth Edition in Japanese bears the title ‘Neville’s Concrete Bible’. He wrote the completely revised fifth edition in 2011 when he was 88, helped as ever by Mary who was his scribe, research assistant, typist, proof reader. The book was described in a review as ‘the ultimate concrete reference book, yet is so usable in everyday practice that we each keep one within easy reach of our desks.’ This was the first of Adam’s eleven books, one of five still in print, not to mention over 250 academic papers. His excellence in research led later to the award of a DSc by the University of London in 1965 and a second DSc for further research by Leeds University in 1978.

Whilst in Nigeria, Adam travelled with the family as widely as he could in a Morris Traveller, not ideally suited for the terrain. On one journey made from Maiduguri to Chad during the rainy season, although the road was closed except to trucks, undeterred, the family set off along the terribly rutted road, Adam with one arm out of the window to wipe the mud off the windscreen. Unfortunately, they ran out of petrol and Adam lay under a
tree with the only water bottle, having succumbed to a bout of malaria, until another vehicle passed some hours later.

In 1963 Adam moved to Saskatoon in Canada, then to the new University of Calgary as the founding Dean of Engineering. Close to the Rockies, Adam could indulge his love of skiing, developed as a boy in the Tatras, and joined the ski patrol. He did not give up skiing until he was 80.

He returned to the UK in 1968 as Professor and Head of the Department of Civil Engineering at the University of Leeds which he built up to become the largest civil engineering department in the country, while continuing to undertake research himself. He encouraged women to take up engineering careers and at one time there were more female civil engineering students at Leeds University than in the rest of the universities in the UK put together.

In 1978 Adam was appointed Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Dundee, the first civil engineer to hold such a post, beginning the transformation of that university by focussing on quality research and laying the foundations for the establishment of the University’s prestigious Institute of Life Sciences. He was Chairman of the Committee of Principals of Scottish Universities. In 1987 he left university life and became an engineering consultant. He was a much sought after expert witness, giving evidence around the world in major cases. In 1994 he was made a CBE for services to technology and science.

Adam was a civil engineer of international standing, his specialism being concrete construction and, even when Dean and Professor, did not stop conducting research. He pioneered the study of high alumina cement and, in 1963, predicted its unstable nature. This finding was controversial because of strong commercial interests in the material, but his concern was proved correct by several dramatic structural collapses in the early 1970s, one being the roof collapse of the swimming pool of the Sir John Cass’s Foundation and Red Coat School in Stepney, thankfully empty as the teacher had evacuated the pool just in time after a child found a piece of concrete in the water at the bottom.
His achievements were recognized by numerous awards, medals, and fellowships from many countries including the United States, Brazil, Poland and Singapore. Honorary doctorates were awarded St Andrew’s, Dundee, Sherbrooke (Quebec) and Calgary universities. He was made an Honorary Fellow of Queen Mary University of London and Magistrale Honorem of the prestigious engineering Polytechnic University of Turin, where he had studied while still in Italy after the armistice. He was the President of the Concrete Society and received its Gold Medal and the Vice President of the Royal Academy of Engineering, which awarded him a Medal for Sustained Achievement in 2008.

Apart from skiing, Adam’s other major interest was visiting as many countries and islands as possible, or not so much visiting as adventuring. He travelled to over 250 countries and major islands and he gained the 250 Award of the Travelers’ (sic) Century Club. He had been at least once, to every country in Africa and in the Americas.

His appetite for adventure was sometimes stressful for Mary, such as when they crossed the wide estuarial and very rough Gambia River from Senegal to The Gambia and back again in an overladen dugout canoe, while the terrified passengers all prayed. He carried out his wish to travel to Antarctica by persuading the pilot of a landing craft in the Chilean Antarctic, which was provisioning the annual supply ship at anchor, to give him and Mary a ride. When they reached the ship, to Mary’s amazement, he climbed up the scrambling net onto the deck (she was compelled to follow) and asked the captain to take them with him. The captain agreed, not least because Adam spoke Spanish, and because the landing craft had already left for shore, and so they travelled to the Chilean supplied bases to exchange personnel and replenish stores. Not only did Adam speak Spanish, but he was an accomplished linguist, fluent in seven languages.

On leaving Dundee, Adam and Mary moved to Wapping in the heart of London, a central location for keeping in touch with family, friends and professional contacts, and a jumping off spot for work and personal travel. Adam’s health was affected by the cold and starvation of his early years, and his hearing by the constant artillery shelling. But he never gave up, travelling for as long as he could and socializing till the end. Adam died peacefully at home on 6th October 2016. He is survived by his wife Mary, their two children and five grandchildren.