

OBITUARY : MARJORIE COURTENAY-LATIMER

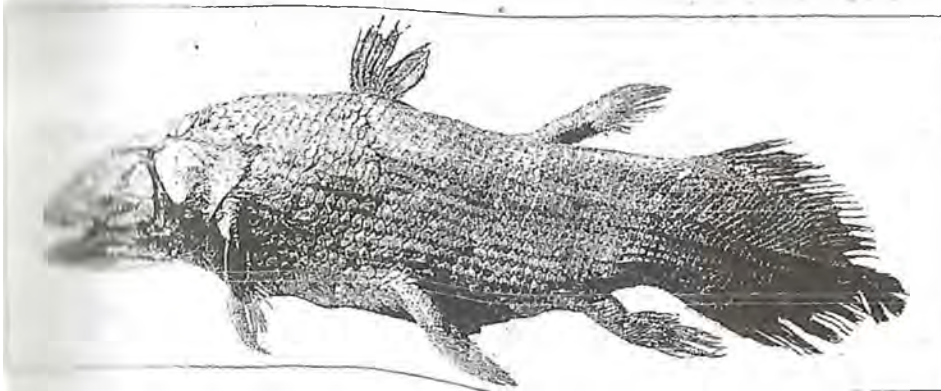
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OBITUARIES

MARJORIE COURTENAY-LATIMER

Marine biologist and naturalist who discovered the coelacanth, a marine creature thought extinct for millions of years



On a boiling hot South African day in December 1938, Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer weighed the odds between completing the fossil display in the small museum where she worked, and going down to the dockside on the off-chance of spotting some interesting specimens among the catch of fish that had just come in. Duty briefly strove with the chance of some fresh air, before she decided to make her way down to the East London docks. In doing so she became part of the momentous zoological event of the 20th century – the discovery of the coelacanth, a fish thought to have been extinct for 80 million years.

When Courtenay-Latimer, a favourite with local fishermen because of her interest in marine life, boarded the trawler *Nerine* she was confronted by a couple of tons of sharks, dogfish, sponges and starfish, piled up on the fo'c'sle for her inspection. Hitching up her cotton dress, she rifled through this already odoriferous assortment with diminishing expectation. She was about to tell the only crewman on deck that she intended to return to the museum, when she suddenly noticed a blue fin protruding from the pile. Pulling away the other carcasses she happened upon "the most beautiful fish I had ever seen".

Of one thing she was certain. The 5ft long fish, covered in hard scales and with "four limb-like fins and a strange puppy-dog tail" was like no other marine animal she had ever come across. Although as the curator of the East London Museum she was virtually self-educated in zoological matters, she was convinced that she had come across something extraordinary. The big question was how to preserve the evidence for any

length of time in the sultry heat of the Eastern Cape Province summer?

With a helper, she managed to ease the fish – which weighed 127lbs – into a sack and manhandle it to the dockside, where the pair summoned a taxi. After much entreaty, its reluctant driver agreed to allow this noisome cargo to be stowed in his boot and they sped back to the museum.

There, none of the small selection of books she could lay her hands on provided any clue to the strange visitant lying on the museum table. When she triumphantly showed it to the chairman of the museum, he was dismissive. "Mistress Madge, you're making such a fuss about it. It's nothing but a rock cod. All your geese are swans."

He had reckoned without the streak of stubbornness that was integral to "Mistress Madge's" nature. She was determined to consult Dr J.L.B. Smith, a chemistry lecturer at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, 100 miles away, and a celebrated amateur ichthyologist. Unable to reach him by phone, on December 23 she wrote him a letter, enclosing the now famous first drawing of a coelacanth, complete with a description of its characteristics. Recovering from an illness on leave in Knysna, 200 miles farther down the coast from Grahamstown, Smith did not get her letter until January 3. He studied it at first in complete puzzlement. "And then a bomb seemed to burst in my brain, and beyond that sketch and the paper of the letter I was looking at a series of fishy creatures that flashed up as on a screen, fishes no longer there, fishes that had lived in dim past ages gone, and of which only fragmentary remains in rocks are known."

Barely able to contain his excitement, Smith went immediately to the Knysna post office and wired Courtenay-Latimer. "MOST IMPORTANT PRESERVE SKELETON AND GILLS FISH DESCRIBED". He later urged her to save the fish's viscera.

In the meantime Courtenay-Latimer had plumbed the depths of despair. In the close weather her find was already beginning to decompose. She tried in succession East London's mortuary and cold store, but was rebuffed by the custodians of both. Realising that the whole of her evidence was at risk, she asked a local taxidermist to skin and mount the creature, also preserving some of its soft parts. But Smith's second missive arrived too late to prevent the viscera from disappearing into East London's municipal rubbish.

Nevertheless, when Smith arrived in East London on February 16, 1939, and went straight to the museum, he was totally convinced by the evidence that met his eyes. "Although I had come prepared, that first sight hit me like a white-hot blast ----- I stood as if stricken to stone. Yes, there was not a shadow of a doubt, scale by scale, bone by bone, fin by fin, it was a true coelacanth. It could have been one of those creatures of 200 million years ago come alive again." Indeed, the coelacanth, until then known only from fossil remains, is thought to have begun evolving towards the end of the Devonian period, more than 300 million years ago.

Such a momentous discovery required careful handling if it was not to be pirated by some rival. At Courtenay-Latimer's urging, the *East London Daily Dispatch* was allowed to publish one photograph, before the fish was sent by rail under police guard to Rhodes University. From Grahamstown, Smith sent a



15. Mr C. D. Harrald, the taxi driver who reluctantly transported the coelacanth to the Museum in 1938, Marjorie, Mrs Margaret Smith at the opening of the coelacanth gallery at the East London Museum in August 1980. Photo: *Daily Dispatch*.



16. Marjorie cuts an elaborate cake at a reception to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the finding of the coelacanth. With her is the Mayor of East London, Alderman Donald Card, December 1988. Photo: *Daily Dispatch*.



Portrait of Marjorie by Christina Reeve, 1990. Photo: East London Museum.

23rd Nov

Picked an awful
when Freddie and I
great - found an
had one chick in
every where
and breath
heave
Fred
mate
owl



Page from a scrapbook that Marjorie kept of a holiday to Bushman's

flowers - on a glorious ramble
all day walk to Heirling - it was
near Freddie climbed but next
pledged.
it was beautiful - watched talked
every scrap of this day was
evening on our way home
you can carry food to
and no luck - I found a Woodford
at us - Freddie shot the Buzz and
at 7 p.m. and so we arrived
and ready for supper



a deep pool filled with deep
mysteries. A wonder pool!!



Marjorie, Captain Goosen and a cast of the coelacanth at a function at the East London Museum to mark the 50th Anniversary of the finding of the coelacanth, November 17th, 1988.

Photo: *Daily Dispatch*.



Marjorie after spending a week in the Comores in June 1989. She met President Ahmed Abdallah to whom she presented a Wedgwood coelacanth plate. The trip was a dream come true for Marge.

Photo: *Daily Dispatch*.

description and picture to London where in March it was published in *Nature* under the headline, garnered from Pliny: "Ex Africa Semper Aliquid Novi" (out of Africa there is always something new). Though Courtenay-Latimer modestly disclaimed any credit, insisting that the fish should be named after the skipper who had trawled it up, Smith acknowledged her vital role in the name given to the coelacanth: *Latimeria chalumnae*, the second part of its classification referring to the Chalumna River, near where it was caught.

A carping letter subsequently published in *Nature* criticized Smith for naming the fish after Courtenay-Latimer since she had done science a "disservice" by failing to preserve the viscera. Smith's rebuttal, also in the columns of *Nature*, was robust. "It was the energy and determination of Miss Latimer which saved so much, and scientific workers have good cause to be grateful. The genus *Latimeria* stands as my tribute."

----- Taking the job [as the curator of the East London Museum] in August 1931, she entered the building to survey her empire. It consisted, she recalled, of: "six birds riddled with demestes (beetles), a bottled piglet with six legs, about twelve pictures of East London, which were quite nice, and twelve prints of [Frontier] War scenes".

Junking the entire contents of the museum's display, she began the task of painstakingly building up something worthwhile and representative of the region. In 1933 she first met Smith and he encouraged her in her work. She also spent six months at the South African Museum in Cape Town where she greatly increased her knowledge of coastal birds. She spent three months at Bird Island, dragging with her her reluctant parents,

her father being much more interested in the abdication crisis in England.

After the coelacanth discovery, the subject was to remain part of her life. Interest received fresh impetus in 1952 when a second coelacanth was fished up from the deep off the Comoro Islands between Africa and Madagascar. This gave Smith, who had never given up the search, his first sighting of a fresh coelacanth, after an interval of 14 years. This led to the documenting of the first known coelacanth population. More recently coelacanths have been found off Sulawesi, Indonesia, 6000 miles east of the Indian Ocean populations.

After retiring from the East London Museum, Courtenay-Latimer continued to take an interest in coelacanth developments, and was awarded an honorary doctorate by Rhodes University in 1973. ----- In 1998 she was guest of honour at a ceremony organized by the South African Mint to launch a collector's edition of coelacanth gold coins.

Although romance was no stranger to her, she never married.
