

FIELD TRIPS AND FRIENDSHIP: A MEMOIR OF MARJORIE COURTENAY-LATIMER

By R.M. Tietz

Marjorie Eileen Doris Courtenay-Latimer, former director of the East London Museum, D.Phil. (Honoris causa) of Rhodes University, Fellow of the South African Museums Association, Honorary Life Vice-President of our Society and Freeman of the City of East London died after a short illness on May 17, 2004. She was 97 and had earned an international reputation for saving the famous fossil fish for science.

"Lass, your discovery will be on every scientist's lips throughout the world. It is a coelacanth!" With these words J.L.B. Smith greeted Miss Latimer on February 16, 1939 when he first saw "The Fish" in the East London Museum. Sixty-four years later scientists at the International Coastal and Ocean Exploration Conference held in East London in October, 2003, were more interested in seeing her and having their photographs taken with her than in her name-sake, the type-specimen of *Latimeria chalumnae*, and many knelt before her the better to speak with her.

Marge was guest of honour at the reception and delegates listened spellbound as she told the story for the thousandth time "----- of how I got entangled with the coelacanth. I was born on February 24, 1907 in ---- East London -----". The coelacanth story is so well documented there is no need to repeat it here; but it could never have happened if Marge

hadn't been the curious, energetic, fearless, determined, resourceful and inspired naturalist she was.

-----Her first official field trip took place in 1934 to excavate a Karoo fossil near Tarkastad. "Teaspoonful by teaspoonful" said Marge. It amply demonstrates the two guiding factors in her life. She was accompanied by her friends Bess Wilson, her brother Eric Wilson and their father Robert Wilson (of the Wilson sweet factory) a trustee who financed the trip. The fossil turned out to be a significant one named *Kannemeyria wilsonii* (now *Simocephalus wilsonii*). Once Marge had re-assembled the bones, most expertly for one so inexperienced (according to the boffins at the Bernard Price Institute), it was reputed to be the most complete skeleton of a dicynodont reptile.

In 1936 Marge took her first leave and went to Bird Island with her parents where she spent six weeks collecting birds and marine specimens. Apparently trawlers brought 15 crates of material back to East London for her. She also made a study of bird life which resulted in her first scientific paper, *Observations of Terns on Bird Island*.

In 1963 a trip to Bird Island was arranged for Marge to comment on the environmental changes that had taken place in the intervening years. I had the good fortune to be included and found we were the only two women aboard the trawler, *African Boy*. Conditions were primitive to say the least. We shared the captain's 6 x 4 foot cabin, sleeping while he was on watch. There were no "heads" (or they had not been used for so long they no longer worked) so the skipper handed us a pail for use in the engine room with strict instructions that we dispose of the contents aft. Since our ablutions called for a

major re-arrangement of the ship's company on deck and it was difficult to balance while the boat was pitching and rolling we decided to use this facility only in extreme emergency. We also reluctantly declined the endless cups of hot tea and coffee that came our way for fear of trips to the engine room!

No account of Marge's life would be complete without mention of GG. Mr. G.G. Smith, a keen naturalist with a special interest in botany, first visited the museum in 1932 when *Huberta* the hippo was on exhibition and became a firm friend and contributor, regularly inviting Marge and her mother to accompany him on field trips to collect specimens for the museum. In 1942 GG was elected Chairman of the East London Museum having served for two years on the Board. Marge and GG were inseparable and totally committed to developing the museum; she to collection, exhibitions and public service while he saw to administration, finance, technical requirements and logistics until both retired in 1973.

Field trips were to occupy a large proportion of their museum calendar. According to Errol Hayden "The three of us (Marge GG and EH) went out collecting specimens on weekends and public holidays and we had at least two long field trips a year."

Jack Skead who accompanied them on many trips during the 1950's said when "Attending conferences Marjorie and Mr. G.G. Smith always made the most of any free time after a day's meeting to be out in the veld collecting and studying birds. ----- Such escapades would extend to early morning rises (5 o'clock and the like) to collect a bird or two when they were at their most active, feeding or moving about."

"In the field (Marge's) eyes were everywhere. When travelling anywhere (always in Mr. G.G. Smith's car where each paid their own expenses) she would stop the car wherever or whenever something at the roadside attracted her attention. Anything; it could be a plant in which she happened to be taking a particular interest, a stone, a geological formation, a road casualty (bird, stinkmuishond, whatever), a memorial stone, the more so if it carried some special historical significance."

Of course everything was recorded in a notebook; the weather, people they met, birds they spotted, plants flowering and specimens collected with their localities and notes on habitat. This habit of documenting her trips Marge continued, even when we went on SAMA outings and Historical Society excursions in the 1990's, and was incredibly useful in checking facts and answering queries.

Another aspect on which several colleagues have commented is that Marge, unlike any of her female companions, always wore a skirt on collecting trips (and on the *African Boy*). She had grown up in an age when ladies didn't wear trousers, so it was that Marge always dressed like a lady and never failed to return from the field with her stockings torn to shreds. Errol was to remark that "Even in the confines of camp, she maintained her modesty and lady-like demcanour."

A trip of a different kind, to study displays, took place in 1960 when Marge, GG and Errol "Toured the British Museums together taking the cheapest lodgings we could find. Marge was always her cheerful enthusiastic self. She would play 'mother' and serve tea and simple meals." Errol goes on to say

“On collecting trips, after a long day’s hunting, she sat cooking at an open fire, and served ‘pudding’ with every evening meal. She had always hated slothfulness, and one seldom saw her inactive; it seemed as though no obstacle could deter her from pursuing her many interests.”

Marge collected profusely. Auriol Batten said once on a collecting trip to the forest near Stutterheim, Marge disappeared for some time and when she returned to base she was carrying all manner of plants and branches, even a tree fern. GG was heard to remark “Here comes Evelyn Valley” (a verdant valley near the Pirie Dam).

Yet those extensive collections of plants together with her notes and drawings were essential in the preparation of that botanical classic *The Wild Flowers of the Eastern Cape Province* which Auriol Batten and Hertha Bokelmann illustrated so brilliantly. She also co-authored a book with G.G. Smith on *The Wild Flowers of the Tsitsikama National Park*, published in 1967.

Her drive to collect artifacts, plants, shells and fossils persisted into her eighties and nineties. In 1992 I arranged a field trip under the leadership of Prof. Alan Morris to the Hofmeyr district to revisit the site where the fossil human skull had been unearthed in the late 1950’s.

In the absence of dating techniques it had been impossible to put an age to the Hofmeyr skull yet Marge always believed it to be significant. She was so anxious to accompany Alan to search for a cultural context that she wrote “Nancy Tietz says her camping days are over but I am prepared to stay anywhere,

under any conditions, just as long as there is any possibility of finding evidence." Shortly before she died Marge was delighted to hear from Alan Morris that the skull was indeed an important find and he was about to publish a paper on its significance in the development of the San people.

Marge celebrated her 92nd birthday with museum staff on the lawn under the old fig trees and said to us on that occasion: "I have realized there is one thing that means more to me in my long life than anything else and that is Friendship!" With that the Coelacanth flew out of the window, *Kannemeyria* re-buried itself, flowers drooped and birds fell off their mounts while Marge urged us to look after our friends and, by extension, the Friends of the Museum.

From the beginning Marge involved her friends in the museum or involved people in the museum who became her friends. One such person is Dorothy Randell who was a close friend "ever since I was a starry-eyed young Fine Arts graduate in 1932 with dreams of becoming a famous sculptor. Marge asked if I would help her with her Xhosa section of the new museum. She wanted figures of an abakwetha [a Xhosa initiate in the rite of passage from boyhood to manhood] and a witchdoctor to display their attire. We went to look for suitable models in the location and found people who were prepared, after lots of talking, to sit for me."

Auriol Batten too is a life-long friend who helped with special exhibitions and participated in botanical field trips. Few people know that it was Auriol who painted the background for the case that houses the reconstruction of the dodo and its egg.



Samantha Weinberg, the author of *A Fish Caught in Time*, with Marjorie next to the coelacanth type specimen in the East London Museum, October 24th 1999.
Photo: *Daily Dispatch*.



A reunion with Dorothy Randell, sculptor of this portrait bust of Marjorie in the 1950s, at her birthday celebration at the East London Museum, February 2001.
Photo: East London Museum.

Dr Marjorie Courtenay
-Latimer and Dr Auriol
Batten attending the
Rhodes University
graduation ceremony
in East London, 2000.
Photo: Auriol Batten.



Marjorie in 1997 at a function for her 90th birthday at the East London Museum with teacher Kim Ranwell and a group of pupils from Clarendon Preparatory School who came to present her with flowers and a project on the coelacanth.
Photo: East London Museum.

Dorothy went on to say that Marge loved every minute of her work. "She loved her fellow men and all creatures great and small and she in turn was loved by all. There would be knocks on the back door ---- children bringing their "finds" ---- they knew she would be interested and look and listen. Never once did she make them feel that the treasure they had found was not important ----- a speckled stone, a feather, a butterfly, a strange eggshell."

Children were also in mind when she developed displays in the new building from 1951. The dioramas extend down to the floor so that they can be viewed by all sizes and the galleries were sprinkled with such enticing exhibits as "The Crystal Cavern" and "Jimmy the Crow", much mourned by East Londoners, a live beehive and underwater monsters which demonstrated that the real creatures were stranger than fiction. A special feature was all the baby animals which Marge included and children still delight in the baby elephant, baby bat, baby crocodiles, baby jackals, baby buck, baby porcupine and a baby bushbaby.

Jack Skead echoes these sentiments with "Young people came high in her specialities. She helped them to find their feet in the natural history world and encouraged them to see beyond the limits of their urban worlds." Mike Bruton was a frequent visitor as a schoolboy and Richard Liversidge spent Wednesday afternoons at the museum helping with the preparation of specimens. When he had passed JC (Junior Certificate), Marge offered him a job at the museum. Richard thought about it then asked if museum jobs carried a pension and when the answer was "No" (a fact Marge was to regret in

later life) he told her that he wouldn't be working in the museum!

Ros White remembers as an inexperienced museum historian "Doing an exhibition of commemorative ware and inadvertently tipping the bracket which held a particularly attractive cup. I was devastated by the breakage but she was supportive and tried to console me, saying 'Errol will mend it'. Though she obviously cared greatly about her collection she was not going to destroy the enthusiasm of a young staff member, and I always appreciated that."

Errol Hayden recalls "I met Marge as a schoolboy in the old museum in 1946. I must have been eight or nine, and used to take clay and model from the specimens. At first she viewed me with deep suspicion as she did all boys but soon revealed herself to be supportive and encouraging of all young people who showed potential. She wasn't blind to one's defects and she could be bitingly critical, but she usually showed great tolerance. She was kind and charming, but was outspoken to the point of rudeness if someone imposed." Errol went on to say "She was firm in her convictions, and a staunch ally." This can be borne out by her colleagues including Dr Douglas Hey who looked upon her as "A valued member of the Nature Conservation Advisory Committee. I have never forgotten her passionate pleas at almost every meeting for the licencing of all domestic cats, which she regarded as the major killers of garden birds, and rightly so."

When Skead said "Marjorie was a caring person far beyond the call of duty" I was reminded of an incident during East London's frightening flood of 1970. I was on my annual visit to catalogue

the museum's books and was working in the general office when the rain started to beat down in massive blinding sheets. The lights went out. People out on the street made their way to the museum on higher ground and sought refuge in the marine gallery. They were utterly drenched, shivering and scared and stood in pools of water staring at the fishes staring at them in the gloom. In no time Marge had got a heap of towels and newspapers together and rallied us to come through to help her persuade the refugees to remove their wet clothes and wrap themselves in newspaper for warmth. One young girl was too shy to take off her jumper so Marge said, "Well, we'll just stuff the newspaper up your jersey." A youth who overheard this comment said from his newspaper cocoon "We should have known we would get stuffed in the museum." Once everyone was reasonably dry she was determined to give them something hot to drink. Of course the kettle wasn't working so, nothing daunted, she removed her shoes and stockings, donned somebody's lab coat and paddled out to the workshop to retrieve the primus, pot, paraffin and two packets of soup from the camping equipment. Alton managed to get the primus stove going and Marge managed to squeeze some 30 cups of soup out of the packets that would normally have served eight!

Marge was a most hospitable person and she received an endless stream of visitors, friends as well as complete strangers. There were many staying guests. Philip Ciancney spent an annual holiday with her and, said Marge, "Ate huge breakfasts." Ros White recalls "When (Marge) was in her 90's I was fortunate to spend two short holidays with her in her home in East London and revelled in her amazing memory, her sense of humour and her fascinating stories of an extraordinary life. Even at that age Marge was always giving of herself and

she has enriched my life in later years even as she did as a young historian.”

Jack Skead wrote “Marjorie had a wide range of friends in many small towns through which we passed on our way to and from conferences, people of all walks of life who were always pleased to see her because of mutual interests which had been discussed between them on previous visits or had been exchanged by back-and-forth correspondence.” Marge certainly looked after her friends and carried on a vast correspondence with colleagues and acquaintances all over the world. Anyone who had organized an outing or invited her to a function will remember having received a letter of thanks and encouragement from her after the occasion.

Thus it is that we remember Marge, for herself, for warmth and laughter and for her considerable achievements. May she rest in peace.

Compiled by R.M. Tietz from the recollections of friends and colleagues and many happy hours in conversation with Marge.

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