Emeritus Professor John Cloudsley-Thompson (1921–2013)

Emeritus Professor of Zoology

Born in 1921 at Murree in India (now in modern-day Pakistan), Dr Cloudsley-Thompson was stationed in North Africa in the Second World War. It was here that he began to develop a great interest in desert wildlife, and he adopted some of the native animals, including a baby fox - for which he had bartered with overripe bananas and some loose change.

He became a tank commander by the time he was 21 and went on to survive an ambush on his tank, in which all of his crew were injured or killed and which left him with a severe leg injury.

John came to Birkbeck in 1972 as Professor of Zoology. His narration was simple: he was fascinated by animals and how they interacted with their environment. While at Birkbeck he was known to be not only a passionate teacher, but also a great listener, nurturing and engaging with his students, often sitting on a lab bench and chatting to students long after the lecture had finished. He would turn up to the College on his 70cc motorcycle, wearing a leather flying jacket, a helmet and goggles.

On leaving Birkbeck in 1986, he became an Emeritus Professor. Richard Griffiths, who was a PhD student under John’s supervision from 1979 to 1983, remembers Professor Cloudsley-Thompson with great affection. He said: “He was an incredibly warm, kindly and modest person. He was a great inspiration to me and many others around the world. I know other students will also remember him with great affection.”

“Through his studies of wildlife in the world’s deserts, Cloudsley-Thompson did more than anyone to further our understanding of the extraordinary creatures that make their home in some of the harshest environments on the planet. His main breakthrough was in understanding the process of desert erosion and in particular how fast the desert moves over the surrounding savannah grasslands.”

Paying tribute to “the Titan of the Sahara”, The Guardian’s obituary of Professor Cloudsley-Thompson called him “one of the last of the great adventure-scientists of the mid-20th century – a man whose considerable exploits read like something out of a Boys’ Own adventure story.”

Professor Cloudsley-Thompson was a prolific writer, whose best-known works were Zoology of Tropical Africa (1969), Insects and History (1976) and Tooth and Claw: Defensive Strategies in the Animal World (1968). He was president of the British Arachnological Society, of the British Society for Chronobiology and of the British Herpetological Society. In 1993 he won the Peter Scott Memorial Award for outstanding services to our understanding of natural history.

Left: Emeritus Professor John Cloudsley-Thompson.

Biologist and raconteur John Attridge, inspirational teacher John Cloudsley-Thompson, and philosophy father-figure David Hamlyn are remembered by former colleagues

John Attridge (1924–2012)

First Head of Birkbeck’s Department of Biology

A much loved former colleague and lecturer, John retired in 1987, having been a member of Birkbeck’s staff for more than 30 years. He was a Fulbright Scholar, coming to Birkbeck from St Andrews in 1956 as a senior lecturer in zoology and serving as the last Head of the Zoology Department and the first Head of the new Biology Department. John Attridge was also Chairman of the Board of Examiners for the University of London External System’s BSc Degree in Zoology; President of the Senior Common Room; and President of the Tetrapods Club, a club for palaeontologists and anatomists that dates back to the era of nineteenth-century biologist Thomas Huxley.

Dr David Havill, a lecturer in biology at Birkbeck since 1954, was a close friend. He said: “John was a great palaeontologist with a particular knack of finding new or important dinosaur fossils in various parts of the world. He was very tall, over 6’5”, with a personality to match. A spellbinding raconteur, he was also an inspired teacher in the lecture theatre, laboratory and in the field.”

Geoff Coast, another former colleague and friend, added: “There will be generations of students who will recall his lectures, and his contribution to numerous marine biology field courses”.

Professor David Hamlyn (1924–2012)

Professor and Head of Philosophy at Birkbeck from 1964 until his retirement in 1988

Dorothy Edgington, Professor of Philosophy at Birkbeck, wrote: “David joined the Department of Philosophy (which then had just two other members, following the death of Cyril Cochrane at Birkbeck) as a lecturer in 1954. “David read classics and philosophy at Oxford, interrupted by two years in the army during the war, and then took another degree there in philosophy and psychology. This gave him a lasting interest in perception, the subject of his first book, The Psychology of Perception (1957), and his last, Understanding Perception (1996). “But his interests and expertise were broad...”

“Permanent heads of department have gone out of fashion, but David was a model of the old kind. The Department was his. He did everything. He cared about, and was a father figure to, colleagues and students alike. He thought the world of Birkbeck students: he admired them for choosing to do philosophy, for lots of interestingly different reasons, in their spare time. He relished the fact that his students were so varied, with all sorts of background, expertise, tastes and interests. “David was Vice-Master of Birkbeck from 1983 to 1988, and became a Fellow of the College in 1988. He is survived by his wife Eileen, his children Nicholas and Catherine, and his granddaughter Sarah. He is also survived by a still-floshing Philosophy Department, largely of his making.”

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