

Obituary

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OBITUARY

Richard ('Dick') Neil KILBURN
(7.01.1942—26.07.2013)



Dick Kilburn at the Natural History Museum, London, in 1993.

One of South Africa's foremost malacologists, Richard Kilburn passed away somewhat suddenly on 26 July 2013 at the age of 71. Dick, as he was known to his many friends and correspondents, was born on 7 January 1942 in Port Elizabeth. He attended Grey High School¹ and as a schoolboy developed an interest in sea shells that was to become a passion to which he devoted the rest of his life. Matriculating in 1959, he then took up a clerical job with Barclays Bank in Port Elizabeth, purely to earn some funds so that he could go to university. During this time he corresponded with Keppel Barnard at the South African Museum, the then authority on South African marine molluscs, and he also regularly visited Dolf van Bruggen who was at the time curator of the newly established Port Elizabeth Oceanarium. Thus encouraged to pursue his malacological interests, Dick attended the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, majoring in zoology and botany, and graduating with honours in 1967. After a brief spell as a biology teacher in Howick school, near Pietermaritzburg (where he also taught tennis and swimming!), Dick was offered a malacological position at the East London Museum – one can only imagine how pleased he must have been to get this. However, not 18 months later, he was back in Pietermaritzburg as malacologist at the Natal Museum. Taking up this post on 1 September 1969, Dick was to spend the rest of his scientific career at this museum.

¹ Interestingly, Dr Brian Stuckenberg (1930–2009), former Director of the Natal Museum, also attended this school, though more than 10 years before Dick Kilburn (Kirk-Spriggs 2012).

It was an insightful appointment. Under Dick's stewardship the Natal Museum's Mollusca collection was to become by far the largest such collection in Africa and a globally important malacological resource. Early in his career, Dick realised that South African malacology was hampered by a number of factors, critical amongst which were the inadequacy of the existing mollusc collections and the unavailability of most of the key literature. It was Dick's goal to address these shortcomings as far as possible and to establish a molluscan research centre at the Natal Museum – in today's parlance 'a Centre of Excellence for Malacology'.

Fortuitously, in the late 1970s a programme for the rationalisation of natural history collections in South Africa, through mutually beneficial exchange, was initiated. Dick jumped at this, seeing it as an opportunity to acquire the large and historically important mollusc collections of the Albany and Transvaal museums, in exchange for orphaned collections in the Natal Museum. These newly acquired collections proved to contain many unrecognised or supposedly lost types. Other collections were also acquired including those of Rodney Wood (Umtali [Mutare] Museum), by further exchange, and Clarice Connolly, Kurt Grosch and Eva Roscoe, by purchase. When funds were available, Dick also engaged in the strategic purchase of specimens from shell dealers for display purposes and to make the collection more representative of global mollusc diversity.

The availability of literature, particularly old literature, is an essential but often limiting factor in taxonomic research. Certainly this was true at the Natal Museum. However, some important old and rare works were donated with exchanged collections by the Transvaal and Mutare museums, and in 1981 Dick was able to persuade the Natal Museum authorities to apply for treasury funds to purchase the malacological library of Helene Boswell, a well known South African shell-collector. Further literature gaps were filled by the purchase of microfiche editions. Hardly used in today's world of PDFs and web-based libraries such as the Biodiversity Heritage Library, microfiches were a valuable resource in pre-internet days.

To further address the first shortcoming, Dick commenced an active programme of field research including shore collecting and dredging, focussing on neglected areas, notably the Transkei region of what is now E. Cape. In March 1981, Dick managed to secure a few day's sea-time on board the RV *Meiring Naudé*, for some exploratory dredging work off southern Natal. Greatly excited by the material collected, Dick applied to the CSIR for further, more regular sea-time and later that year was awarded an annual slot of 10 days aboard the *Meiring Naudé* for a six year dredging programme on the continental shelf and slope off the Transkei coast. Thus began the Natal Museum Dredging Programme and Dick's annual battle with the sea – he loved dredging, but was not a good sailor. Though he tried every possible remedy, conventional and homeopathic, nothing really helped. After the initial six years, further ship-time was granted and the project moved to Zululand (1987–1990) and then to W. Cape (1991–1993), mostly on board the Sea Fisheries Research Vessel *Sardinops*, as the *Meiring Naudé* had been sold off to private enterprise in 1990. Details of the programme were provided by Kilburn & Herbert (1994). The scientific value of the material thus obtained is inestimable. Hundreds of new species were collected, as well as the first living specimens of many taxa and a great many new records for the South African fauna. By this means, therefore, Dick made an enormous contribution to enhancing the extent to which the Natal Museum's mollusc collection reflected the true diversity of the South African marine mollusc fauna.

Nonetheless, for Dick, ship-based collecting was a means to an end, what he really enjoyed was shore-based fieldwork. Complementing the dredging done off the Transkei, Dick visited numerous localities along the Transkei coast in the 1970s and 1980s, to collect intertidal material. In addition, he also got his first taste of tropical molluscs in 1970 when he visited Inhaca Island in southern Mozambique. A second taste, visiting Eva Roscoe in northern Mozambique in 1974, had him hooked. He loved collecting the exotic molluscs of tropical climes, over the years visiting Mozambique a further two times as well as Mauritius, Reunion, Egypt, Malaysia and Indonesia. It was this that also led to him participating in the Tropical Marine Mollusc Programme for the first time in 1997, paying further visits to India, Thailand and Vietnam. His unpublished 'memoirs' of these trips, detailing his experiences along the way, the quality or otherwise of the food and the beer, as well as his observations on the people he encountered (not always complimentary!) make entertaining, though probably unpublishable, reading.

In contrast, Dick did not like collecting land snails. A brief foray into this realm when we started working on our *Field Guide to the land snails and slugs of eastern South Africa* (Herbert & Kilburn 2004) firmly convinced him that land snail collecting was far too much like hard work! The catch per unit effort simply did not justify the sweat and toil. Dick was not a fitness fan – he once memorably quipped 'I get enough exercise fighting the current when I pull the plug out of the bath!' He much preferred fossicking leisurely in tropical habitats, snorkelling in lagoons and scrutinizing strandline grit whilst lying on his stomach in the sun.

Besides enhancing the museum's Mollusca collection, Dick also motivated for additional dedicated staff. When he arrived, the department was essentially a one-man-show, and he had to make do with only occasional short term technical assistance. In 1978, however, he managed to persuade the museum authorities that dedicated full time technical support was needed and Mrs Ruth Fregona was appointed as his assistant. Then again in 1983 Dick was successful in motivating for a second malacology research position, as a result of which I joined the staff in 1984. This augmentation of the staff was an important step towards Dick's goal of creating a centre of malacological expertise at the Natal Museum and was facilitated by support from the museum's then director, Brian Stuckenberg.

Early in his career, Dick's publications essentially represented isolated species descriptions and collations of his taxonomic research findings relating to an assortment of taxa, as and when new material and information was acquired, much coming from shell-collectors. The collections and literature available to him at the time did not allow much more. These collations he published as his 'Taxonomic Notes' (Nos 1–5, from 1970–1975) and 'Taxonomic Studies' (Nos 1–2, 1977, 1980). As the available resources expanded, however, and as his knowledge and confidence grew, his approach soon matured. He began to undertake studies of a more revisionary nature, documenting the entire southern African fauna of selected groups of molluscs, as a result producing more comprehensive and scientifically valuable papers. He started with the Naticidae in 1976, but soon realised work of this nature necessitated that he examine material in overseas museums. Thus in 1978 he spent four months in Europe visiting twelve different museums to examine type material and consult literature not available in South Africa, making valuable personal contacts at the same time. Subsequently he revised the South African fauna of many other groups, usually including Mozambican species as well. His

revision of the genus *Ancilla*, published in 1981, was world-wide in scope. For this he was awarded his PhD degree in 1982 by his *alma mater*, the University of Natal. Other highlights of his revisionary work include, *inter alia*, his revision of the Epitoniidae of southern Africa and Mozambique (1985) and of course his series of papers on the regional fauna of Turridae (*s.l.*), beginning in 1983.

Once bitten by ‘turrids’, this group dominated much of Dick’s research endeavour for the remainder of his career, including his retirement. Latterly, his grand plan was to publish an illustrated and annotated catalogue of the shallow-water Turridae (*s.l.*) of the Indo-West Pacific, based primarily on type material. By then his research interests had expanded well beyond the southern African fauna. Sadly, this ambitious goal was never realised, perhaps it was simply too big a project. Nonetheless, after his retirement, Dick continued to publish papers on Indo-West Pacific turrids, often in collaboration with overseas colleagues who turned to him for advice.

Although these revisionary studies represent the core of Dick’s malacological legacy, a landmark publication in his career was his book (illustrated by Elizabeth Rippey) *Seashells of Southern Africa*, published in 1982. Aside from scientific papers, this was the first serious book to be published on South Africa’s marine molluscs since Krauss’s *Die südafrikanischen Mollusken* (Krauss 1848). Despite its coverage not being fully comprehensive, it contained a wealth of unpublished information on the country’s marine molluscs, as well as a distillation of Dick’s wide knowledge of molluscan biology. A fascinating book that proved to be an extraordinarily useful reference work for southern African marine biologists as well as malacologists far and wide, and one that has been extensively cited.

As a person, Dick was a jovial and rather gentle soul. He had a terrific sense of humour and could always be relied upon for a witty quip or pun. He was, to say the least, an interesting colleague and in many ways a larger-than-life character. Sartorial elegance was not a topic on his agenda – he often arrived at work in rather elderly shorts and shirts, home-made by his wife Jimpy. Conversely, food was a very important item and he loved cooking. Travelling always represented an opportunity for him to explore new taste sensations – sometimes with adverse gastro-intestinal side effects. Dick also had a great fondness for *Oscar*, a stuffed bat that was awarded annually, with much pomp and ceremony, to the Natal Museum employee who had committed the biggest blunder in the preceding twelve months. Of course, he received the award himself several times and always took great pleasure in documenting the errors and transgressions of others when, one year later, it was his turn to pass *Oscar* on to the next recipient. Such frivolity and independence of spirit seems to be missing today.

However, Dick disliked confrontation and being overtly challenged. He did not at all like the increasingly competitive research milieu. He was devoted to his work and wanted to be left alone to pursue that which he thought was interesting and needed to be done. Some might consider this a luxury, but Dick’s legacy attests to the benefit of not being overly prescriptive when dealing with passion-driven individuals such as he.

During his career Dick published 102 scientific papers, 11 book chapters and two books (Herbert & Davis 2013). He also wrote numerous popular articles for *The Strandloper*, the bulletin of the Conchological Society of Southern Africa, of which he was patron for many years. In total he described 361 new species/subspecies, as well as 27 new genera/subgenera. More may well be published in co-authored papers

completed posthumously by his collaborators (we are aware of a further eight new species currently in press). He also had one new genus and 38 new species named in his honour. A complete bibliography together with an inventory of his new molluscan taxa and a listing of taxa named after him is published in the following paper. Dick certainly made his mark in the malacological world and particularly in southern Africa. When he arrived at the Natal Museum in 1969, the institution's mollusc collection comprised only about 9,000 catalogued lots – it now contains nearly 150,000 catalogued lots. This growth has been achieved through the strategic acquisition of important collections and an active departmental fieldwork programme. It is testament to Dick's early vision and ultimately his success in building up a regional centre of malacological reference and expertise with an international profile.

At heart Dick was a dedicated taxonomist and he relished the detective aspects – digging around in the old literature to check identifications and synonymies, comparing types and cited illustrations, following up loose ends and clarifying nomenclatural uncertainties. His tally of 363 species descriptions is, by today's standards, exceptional. Ironically, although such work remains very much needed, endeavour of this kind is no longer valued in today's museums. Scientists of Dick's mould may be a thing of the past. For South African museums, anomalies in channels of governance have meant that fundamental biodiversity research has limited relevance to the funding bodies. Financial strictures resulting from this mismatch led to Dick being forced to retire at 60, something he did not want to do. He was hurt and angered by this turn of events, perhaps understandably so, and sadly, this prematurely curtailed his enthusiasm and productivity, and also regrettably, his involvement with the department that he had done so much to build up.

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