

LARGE ANIMALS AND WIDE HORIZONS [The autobiography of Richard M Laws]. Arnoldus Schytte Blix, Ian Parker and Christine Parker. 2017. Cambridge, England: Janus Publishing Company Ltd. 431 pages. ISBN 978-1-85756-864-6

This is a truly remarkable publication, which is based on Dick Laws' writings covering his entire life (1926–2014). It was brought to publication by the editing of friends and colleagues (above). The book is arranged into three sections: I Seals' Teeth and Whales' Ears, II Hippos' Tears and Elephants' Tusks and III Antarctica and Academe. Dick's working life spanned the world, but this review covers primarily his Antarctic work (the details of his life and career can be found in the Royal Society Memoir by Croxall et al., 2015).

Raised in Whitley Bay, Northumberland, Dick's life was turned upside down as a school evacuee to the Lake District where his "adopted" parents introduced and encouraged him to observe nature in the wide sense and to develop his innate ability to draw and paint. He was a gifted student who later graduated from Cambridge University with First Class Honours in Zoology. Dick Laws' first post was with FIDS (Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey) following interview with the polar authority, Brian Roberts. On 19 December 1947, he sailed on the recently renamed ship the RRS *John Biscoe* from Tilbury – to study Elephant seals (*Mirounga leonina*) as the first professional biologist at Signy Island in the South Orkney Islands. His research extended to two other species of seal (Crabeater and Leopard) and several birds over two winters (1948, 1949) during which he was also Base Leader. It was a small community of three men living in a hut 20 × 14 feet, who integrated well. Six months after his return to Cambridge Dick again went south, this time to South Georgia for a further year (1951). Five major papers resulted from his Antarctic seal work and notably his development of ageing individual seals from growth rings in their teeth. His field research at Signy and South Georgia enabled him to construct life tables for the species and their demography, and also to elucidate their population dynamics. These data formed the basis on which he formulated plans for their management and conservation. At South Georgia Dick mixed well with the sealers on whom he depended for his samples and they accepted him into their world of work in the field and at leisure in the evenings in the ship's fo'c'sle.

Six years after his graduation and a successful PhD thesis, Dick returned to the Antarctic employed as a Junior Whaling Inspector by MAFF (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food). He headed south this time on the F/F *Balaena*, a floating factory ship on a 7-month voyage to the South Atlantic and Antarctica. Working in the Whale Biology Section at the National Institute for Oceanography (NIO) from 1953 to 1961 allowed him to develop a technique to use the waxy ear plugs of baleen whales in ageing individual animals. Two large monographs (published in the *Discovery Reports* series in 1958 and 1961) showcased these results on whale reproduction, growth and age.

Dick spent 7 years away from Antarctic work (1961–68) in Africa studying the ecology of Elephants and Hippopotamus, firstly in Uganda and then Kenya. Using the tooth ageing technique, this work produced fundamental information which would significantly influence the future management of these huge terrestrial species. Returning to the UK, he was appointed Head of Life Sciences in the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) in 1969. It was a significant point in Dick's career and for the Survey which was transitioning from an essentially field-based survey to more experimental and co-ordinated work in its four Divisions (Upper Atmosphere, Glaciology, Biology and Geology). The book relates how in 1973 Dick succeeded Sir Vivian ('Bunny') Fuchs as the Director of BAS and over the next few years how the organisation was centralised in a new headquarters building at Cambridge with improved funding and facilities. BAS and its staff became involved with the Falklands war in 1982 and emerged in a stronger position financially and politically afterwards. The account in the book shows the vital support given to the FCO by Fids who were familiar with the terrain and weather conditions on South Georgia.

During the 14 years of his Directorship, Dick continued to supervise individual biological projects and encouraged research across all areas of polar science. He made a major contribution to international polar activities by his work in SCAR (Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research), the marine BIOMASS (Biological Investigations of Marine Antarctic Systems and Stocks) programme which was based on an ecosystem approach and the eventual development

of CCAMLR (Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources) – which regulates the exploitation of marine resources based on stock assessments and setting catch limits. At the time of his retirement in 1987, he had ensured that BAS was an international leader in polar science, and he had published over 80 scientific papers and books and received many honours (including being appointed Commander of the British Empire in 1983). As a person, Dick was always approachable and enjoyed the company of his staff especially in the Antarctic.

The book is large and on a few occasions, slightly repetitious, but such instances can be overlooked as the text was written over several years. It is undoubtedly “a good read,” well written by a confident man, who worked as a scientist coupled with management and conservation, as a leader in science, Director of a UK polar institute and finally in Cambridge academic life. The illustrations throughout the book reflect Dick’s pleasure in creating art in nature to a very high standard. Dick Laws was perhaps not easy to get to know in life, but his autobiography brings the reader ‘up close and personal’ throughout.

This book details the life and career of an extraordinary man and the editors are to be congratulated on bringing Dick’s

extensive account to publication. It is well written with infinitesimal details but also with insights to Dick’s thoughts and feelings at times. It documents a busy life well lived from his early years in Northumberland and the Lake District to Cambridge and his first Antarctic period at Signy Island and South Georgia working on seals, then his studies on whales to his African interlude with elephants and hippos to his return to the Antarctic arena with BAS, and concludes with his Mastership of St Edmunds College in Cambridge. I recommend this book without reservation if you wish to read and learn about a remarkable man and a remarkable life. (William Block, British Antarctic Survey, Cambridge, UK (wcb@bas.ac.uk)).

References

- Croxall, J., Boyd, I., Parker, I., & Cook, G. (2015) Richard Maitland Laws CBE. 23 April 1926 — 7 October 2014. *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society*, 61, 265–304.

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