

OBITUARY



Ronald Matthew Dobson (8th December 1929 – 21st November 2019) Photograph taken in his retirement. (Photo: the Dobson family)

Dr Ronald Matthew Dobson devoted a large part of his life to studying the natural world as a keen naturalist and a professional biologist. His published work reflects these two strands over a range of subjects within natural history and applied entomology. A bibliography of his publications has been compiled (Appendix).

Early career

Ron was brought up in Blackburn, Lancashire, England and after attending the Queen Elizabeth Grammar School there, he was awarded a scholarship to study Zoology at King's College, University of Cambridge on an accelerated war-time degree, 1943-1945, that required him to work thereafter for the Government. His career in entomology began with a series of roles as an Insect Infestation Inspector for the Ministry of Food from 1945 to 1947, continuing with the Department of Agriculture for Scotland, based in Glasgow up to 1949. In that year he started as a post-graduate entomology student with the Imperial College of Science and Technology, London and conducted research on flea beetles of the genera *Phyllotreta* and *Psylliodes* (Coleoptera, Chrysomelidae), serious pests of cruciferous vegetable crops, at the University of London's Wye College field station in Kent during 1950-1953. It was there, while studying the living

insects in the field, that he met Ruth Nash who was working on insecticides in the Chemistry Department. Her professor introduced them, saying: "This is Miss Nash. I want you to help her; not too much help, mind". Despite Ruth taking up a post in faraway Edinburgh, their association developed into courtship and they married in 1955, by which time Ron had moved to a research post at Rothamsted Experimental Station in Harpenden, Hertfordshire. Details of their shared lives are given in an earlier article about Ruth ([Dobson], 2016), the text of which was provided by Ron but which appeared anonymously. While at Rothamsted, during which time several articles on the results of his Ph.D. had begun to appear, his detailed taxonomic studies on the stored product pests of the genus *Carpophilus* (Coleoptera, Nitidulidae) produced a series of papers. In parallel, work started on the biology and control of the wheat bulb fly (*Leptohylemyia coarctica*) that continued with papers on the subject up to 1964. A film was made featuring Ron's work on this pest and can be accessed at the Pathé News website: <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/wheat-bulb-fly/quiry/Rothamsted>.

At the University of Glasgow

After 1959, having reached the rank of Senior Scientific Officer at Rothamsted, Ron moved to the University of Glasgow, Scotland as Lecturer in Zoology where he progressed to a Senior Lectureship in 1974, retiring in 1995 (though continuing in an honorary capacity for some years). In addition to continuing the wheat bulb fly research, pest crane flies (Diptera, Tipulinae) with their leather jacket larvae were investigated in collaboration with postgraduate students. Ron also got involved with research on domestic dust mites (Arachnida, Pyroglyphidae), causative agents of respiratory diseases in humans.

At the University of Glasgow, Ron had joined a small team (Alex Hill, Douglas Cochrane and Alistair Fraser) teaching an honours degree programme in Agricultural Zoology, focusing on pests and their management. In addition, a postgraduate diploma course (eventually upgraded to a Masters degree) was offered, mainly aimed at overseas students. When Ron started, zoology, both pure and agricultural, attracted small numbers of students (in the seven years after Ron joined, there were on average five graduates per year in zoology and 2.5 in agricultural zoology), but numbers in pure zoology expanded rapidly in the 1970s (22 in 1973), with associated growth in staff numbers, while agricultural zoology remained static (four students in 1973). Student numbers might have been small, but a full complement of lectures and practical classes still needed to be delivered, so teaching loads for the agriculture team were very high. By 1984, when Alex Hill retired (Hancock & Dobson, 2008), the agriculture course was

unsustainable. Ron, however, continued to teach, especially on a second year applied zoology course, as well as supervising postgraduates. One of Ron's last Ph.D. students, Matt Colloff, who worked on house dust mites (1982-1985), went on to a successful career in Australia. He has commented that Ron was an excellent supervisor, providing all the skills needed to start on a scientific career (M. Colloff, pers. comm., December 2019).

Ron was the leader for summer Glasgow University Exploration Society staff-student expeditions to South Uist, Outer Hebrides (1962 and 1964) and Portugal (1966). Whereas only limited reports were produced, their existence is immortalised in the collections deposited in the Hunterian Zoology Museum, Glasgow, the Natural History Museum, London, and in the memories of participants (Downie *et al.*, 2017).

Scottish Natural history

Ron joined the Glasgow Natural History Society in 1963, soon after joining the University's staff. He was a Councillor for many years, Convenor of the Zoology section 1974-1986, an editorial board member 1964-1983, Editor of *The Glasgow Naturalist* 1984-1995, vice-President three times, and was eventually elected to honorary membership in 2001. He and Ruth (who served many years as librarian), were amongst the most consistent attendees at Society meetings, summer and winter.

From 1978 onwards Ron produced numerous papers on Scottish natural history. The work on Muck was conducted mainly during family holidays, but field data from other places were collaboratively obtained with university colleagues and local naturalists. Some were funded by agencies such as the then Nature Conservancy Council for Scotland and structured to form base-line faunistic accounts, in collaboration with colleagues and friends including Roy Crowson, Walter Edgar, Alex Hill, Geoff Hosie and others. The collections gathered for identification were preserved to act as voucher specimens for the species' records.

Hunterian Zoology Museum connections

Ron was a great friend of, and contributor to, the Hunterian Zoology Museum. He acted as an honorary curator, organising student help in arranging the amalgamation and layout of many of the British insect drawers. Before a post for an entomological curator was established in 1997 he advised on incoming research loan requests. Preserved samples from his own field work were deposited in the collections and so, as a donor, his name is associated with many museum records. Teaching agricultural entomology required samples for laboratory-based demonstration and extensive series of specimens of pests of all kinds were gathered and organised by Ron in hundreds of well-labelled tubes kept in racks. Many of these include medically important insects from around the world, not just disease vectors, that impact on humans and stock animals in a variety of ways. Stored product and household pests are also in this valuable series. Some of

the specimens in this part of the teaching collection predated his arrival in Glasgow, but he organised all into a coherent and accessible whole. His appreciation of the value of museum collections arose from his own taxonomic work with *Carpophilus* beetles. His extensive collection of these insects and his manuscript notes recently formed an important research loan to a New Zealand-based student studying the Oceanic fauna (Brown, 2009, 2010). In retirement Ron voluntarily worked through thousands of preserved British beetles (Coleoptera), labelling and identifying them so they could be incorporated into the main series. In addition to this work for the Hunterian, he sent specimens to the Natural History Museum, London numbering eight accessions and a total of 283 insects for inclusion in the U.K. national collections.

Family and interests

Apart from his natural history interests Ron was a devoted family man. He and his wife Ruth "were blessed with five sturdy children who have all distinguished themselves in their chosen fields" to quote a letter from him dated 3rd December 2015. He and Ruth purchased an old schoolhouse on the Ardnamurchan peninsula in north-west Scotland, with great views of the small islands and the Cuillins, and much of their leisure time was spent there, with Ron doing a host of improvement projects. Ardnamurchan was also the centre for their joint work on the natural history of the Muck islands. Ron was a keen aficionado of classical music, especially opera, and he played the violin and viola for many years in amateur orchestras. Another interest was rowing, begun at Cambridge, and continuing in the seas around Ardnamurchan, often solo. The family went to Muck from Ardnamurchan by row boat on some occasions.

Ron died of heart failure in Queen Elizabeth University Hospital in Glasgow on Saturday 21st November 2019. He was nearly 94 years old and lived independently until a few days before his death. He had seven grandchildren and a great grandchild and celebrated a grandson's 18th birthday just a few days before he was taken into hospital. The Glasgow Natural History Society and former colleagues extend their condolences to Ron's family.

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Appendix: A bibliography of publications by Ron Dobson

This list excludes numerous book reviews that appeared in *The Glasgow Naturalist*.

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