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**J**ohn Cloudsley-Thompson, President of the British Herpetological Society between 1991 and 1996, passed away on 4 October 2013 aged 92. John had a long and distinguished academic career and very active military service during the Second World War. Born in India and educated at Marlborough and Pembroke College, Cambridge, John's training was interrupted by the North Africa campaign, where he served as a tank commander with the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division (the famous 'Desert Rats'). His military service was highly formative, as it was during this time that he developed his life-long fascination for desert environments. Badly injured when his tank was hit, John recovered back in England, and honed his teaching skills at Sandhurst where he was a gunnery instructor. However, he returned to action for the Normandy landings and the battle of Villers Bocage. Always an enthusiastic story teller, John related his wartime experiences in one of his very few non-zoological books – *Sharpshooter* published in 2006.

After the war, John returned to Cambridge where he gained an MA and PhD. After a spell teaching at

Kings College London, in 1960 John returned to his beloved Africa as Professor of Zoology at the University of Khartoum. For the next 11 years he carried out his pioneering research on desert animals and their environments that led to a proliferation of books and scientific papers on the subject. During his time in Khartoum, John developed a deep empathy for the Sudanese people and their customs and culture, and ensured that these underpinned the development of the University there.

By the time he returned to England in 1972 as Professor of Zoology at Birkbeck College, he was already a very distinguished zoologist. As an undergraduate student in the late 1970s, I remember our college library having a bulging shelf of titles by 'J.L. Cloudsley-Thompson'. These books were a marvellous resource for students, as they provided a 'one-stop shop' for all those essays! John had an amazing ability to synthesise a vast wealth of scientific knowledge into a single highly readable text. In this way, he neatly filled the niche between natural history books and the more technical literature. The breadth of his writing was truly remarkable, and I can remember immersing myself in such titles as *The Zoology of Tropical Africa*, *Desert Life*, *Terrestrial Environments* and *The Temperature and Water Relations of Reptiles*, particularly when there was a deadline to hit.

On graduating, I took a job as a lab technician at Birkbeck College, and found myself working for the very man who had inspired so many of my essays. It was therefore with some awe and trepidation that I knocked on his office door for the first time. However, I need not have worried. John turned out to be a truly delightful, modest and engaging gentleman and we quickly became friends. His tiny office contained a number of intriguing plastic boxes housing various bugs and beasts, and the conversation quickly turned to herpetology. Although I had never really seriously considered it, John suggested that I undertake a PhD on a herpetological subject under his supervision, and what followed were three of the happiest and most memorable years of my life.

John was an inspirational teacher, and always had time to chat to students, whatever their level. He continued to travel widely to areas of the world rich in wildlife, and often returned with examples of the local fauna in his luggage. On returning from Africa on one occasion, he left a note on a large cardboard box in the prep room,

asking if I could find a home for the occupant. I wasn't sure exactly what the 'occupant' was, but it certainly appeared to be lively. On opening the box I extracted a large male agama that promptly clamped its jaws on my thumb! A colleague had to come to my assistance and remove the animal from my bloodied hand.

John actively encouraged the study of amphibians and reptiles in captivity, and a range of species were used for behavioural research, particularly with regard to activity rhythms and temperature and water relations. This inevitably led to some interesting incidents, including some escapes. I recall one morning arriving early, only to meet one of John's tarantulas determinedly making its way along the corridor. On another, we took delivery of some captive-bred Indian sand boas. As we didn't have a snake bag to hand, John popped one into his jacket pocket to take it to his office to make some measurements. Two days later we turned John's office upside down searching (in vain) for the snake, which had squeezed through a narrow gap in its container. In the 1960s, John published a paper in *Animal Behaviour*, describing the activity rhythms of captive crocodiles housed in a compound at the University of Khartoum. The paper stated that studies were brought to an abrupt end when a storm breached the crocodile enclosure, and a large specimen escaped into the centre of the city 'causing consternation among the populace'. Intrigued by the story, I asked him one coffee break what the outcome was. He told me that the police were called and shot the crocodile, and threatened to prosecute him for failing to securely cage a dangerous wild animal. He told the police that if that was the case, he would in turn sue them for illegally killing valuable research material!

John's retirement in 1986 saw no let up in his writing. Indeed, he obtained an Emeritus position at University College London, and three of his most significant herpetological works were published in retirement: *Ecophysiology of Desert Arthropods and Reptiles* (1991), *The Diversity of Amphibians and Reptiles: An Introduction* (1999), *Ecology and Behaviour of Mesozoic Reptiles* (2005). The latter book was published when he was at the sprightly age of 84! He wrote to me around this time, explaining that he was finding it hard to keep up with the literature, and that *Ecology and Behaviour of Mesozoic Reptiles* would be his last natural history book. His retirement also saw the production of his wartime memoirs and even a historical novel set in AD 60, *The Nile Quest* (1994). During his lifetime, John published over 400 scientific publications, including over 50 authored

or edited books, a record that very few contemporary zoologists can match. His publications were often enlivened by his own delightful line drawings.

Despite his highly significant contributions to the herpetological literature, John never really regarded himself as a herpetologist. 'I'm rather interested in just too much' he once said to me, and certainly, his publications on amphibians and reptiles are outnumbered by his contributions on invertebrates. He had a particular affinity for scorpions and spiders and the study of biological clocks, and his reputation in these fields led to him holding the Presidency of the British Arachnological Society and the British Society for Chronobiology. He was awarded numerous other honours, including the Peter Scott Memorial Award of the British Naturalists' Association, the Royal African Society Medal, the JH Grundy Memorial Medal of the Royal Army Medical College, and several Visiting Fellowships and Honorary degrees from Universities around the world.

Despite his busy schedule, John was always a strong supporter of the British Herpetological Society. Early papers on crocodiles and monitor lizards were published in the 1960s in the *British Journal of Herpetology*, and he was still contributing to the society's publications long into his retirement. In his capacity as President, he attended Council meetings regularly and made thoughtful and perceptive contributions, but always let the Chair of the day steer proceedings. In his final years, he also made a very generous personal donation to the Society's finances.

John was a strong family man, and had a long and very happy marriage to his wife Anne who accompanied him on his travels and expeditions, and who was a talented author and artist herself. Anne sadly died in 2012, and they leave three sons, Peter, Tim and Hugh who also have happy memories of a father who lived a full and interesting life. I know that John would not mind in the slightest at being referred to as an 'old school' academic naturalist, the like of whom we will not see again. He did research not because he was interested in 'big' questions, prestigious grants or high-impact journals, but because he was fascinated by the animals that he studied. It was a real pleasure and privilege to have worked under John's gentle guidance as a student, and he will be missed by all those who he inspired and mentored.

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