Biographical Memoir

Professor Emeritus Denis William Ewer MBE FRSSAf 1913–2009

Professor Denis William (Jakes) Ewer, invertebrate zoologist and physiologist, died aged 96 on 5 April 2009 at High Wycombe near his family home in England. He was born in London on 12 January 1913. His father, William Norman ‘Trilby’ Ewer, was a journalist for the Daily Herald, and his mother, Monica, a novelist of some repute, was also very active in theatrical circles. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that his parents chose godparents from their literary friends for Denis Ewer. His godfather was the distinguished critic Ivor Brown, his godmother the Irish poet and novelist Dora Sigerson. The young Denis Ewer therefore grew up in an interesting environment that not only encouraged his love of the theatre and acting, but because both his parents were active socialists, shaped his left-wing views. During World War I, Trilby Ewer was a conscientious objector who often wrote in support of guild socialism and the National Guilds League. Shortly after the Russian revolution he became a Communist and was kept under surveillance by MI5, although later in life he changed his political opinions and became very anti-Soviet (for more details about Trilby Ewer see Callaghan & Morgan, 2006).

Denis Ewer went to University College School in London. In 1931 he entered Trinity College, Cambridge (his father had studied mathematics at Trinity) where he read for the Natural Science Tripos, obtaining a B.A. in 1934. In his second year at Cambridge he gained the nickname of ‘Jakes’ via a literary route (his father’s nickname also had literary origins). The word ‘ewer’ can mean a jug, chamber pot, or Jerry, and hence the progress to ‘jakes’, Elizabethan English for an outside lavatory. It was at Cambridge that he also met the future communist spy, Kim Philby. After graduating, Jakes Ewer moved to the University of Birmingham where he undertook his doctoral studies (graduating PhD in 1940) under H. Munro Fox. World War II, however, temporarily halted any further academic career, and during the war years he was an Experimental Officer for the Army Operational Research Group (Ministry of Supply) achieving the rank of Major. For his work, which included being a Scientific Advisor to the Chief, Air Defence Division, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, he was awarded the M.B.E. (Member of the British Empire).

In 1946 Ewer was appointed Lecturer in Zoology at the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), and relocated to South Africa along with his Irish wife Dr Rosalie (Griff) Ewer (whom he had met when she was also a young zoologist working under Munro Fox) and their two small children, Biddy and Paddy. Three years later Ewer was promoted to Senior Lecturer. While in Natal, Ewer’s research concerned problems of behaviour and neuromuscular physiology of invertebrates. In 1954 Jakes was appointed Professor and Head of the Department of Zoology and Entomology at Rhodes University and at the end of the year he and his family moved to Grahamstown.

Ewer took over rather primitive facilities at Rhodes with the Department split between two buildings, referred to as the ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ huts. To quote Ewer, the upper hut “appeared to have been built as a makeshift at the end of the Boer War”. In its time it had served as a women’s hostel and for the Department of Physical Education where the markings of a badminton court were still clear on the wooden floor of the wide corridor which ran down one side of the building. The lower hut had an insectary and, as it was not used, Ewer put it to good use as a tea room. Morning tea was where Ewer made most of his announcements and noted who was present – he expected everyone in his Department to be there. He also used it as an opportunity to buy cigarettes for a penny apiece from the smokers. For some reason he did not smoke his pipe in the tearoom, but he would not buy a packet of cigarettes himself, preferring to shove his penny across the table towards whoever was the nearest smoker.

Upon his arrival Ewer immediately campaigned for a new building for his department and set about modernising the undergraduate curricula, which included very little genetics, as well as containing outdated physiology and ecology. Rhodes University had little money to support these improvements, and so began the first of Ewer’s regular struggles against the university. He was not one to give up easily and by 1958 he had his purpose-built building, albeit in an incomplete condition (Hodgson & Craig, 2005). Through personal contacts he also managed to obtain some necessary equipment. For example, kymographs were obtained as a gift from the University of Fort Hare! These old-fashioned instruments became available because the Government had decided to close down Health Science at Fort Hare and move the Faculty to Durban. Ewer also introduced serious research projects for honours students and, as part of the honours examination, students had to pass a translation test from French or German. Ewer, who was accomplished in French, helped tutor students in this language.

Although Ewer’s published research output while he was at Rhodes was not substantial (19 papers in eight years), he and his students continued the work on invertebrate neuromuscular physiology that he had begun in Natal. In addition, along with his co-worker, Dr Anne Alexander, he published a number of important studies on the behaviour and physiology of spiders.
and scorpions. This research added another area of departmental research and it also brought large numbers of these animals into the building. Ewer also published work on the biology of several species of intertidal brachyuran crabs, work that is still regularly cited. The burden of administration, departmental development, together with a large teaching load that he and his staff had to shoulder, undoubtedly affected his research output detrimentally. Nevertheless, it was during his time at Rhodes that he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa (1959) and he maintained his membership up until his death.

As Head of Department, Ewer did not shirk teaching responsibilities. He was noted for his lecturing skills and for him each lecture was a theatrical performance. Anyone lecturing by ‘dictation’ was soon rebuked, and this brought about conflicts with some of the other academic staff.

During his tenure at Rhodes, Ewer had several confrontations with university management, often in spectacular fashion. On one occasion, to make a point about the lack of refuse removal from the department, he and his staff marched in full academic dress to the Registrar’s office, leaving behind full bins of biological rubbish. From that day onwards the departmental waste was collected on a regular basis.

In 1963 Ewer left Rhodes (and South Africa) after one final confrontation.

Whilst he may have been ready to leave for new challenges, the university’s award of an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws to Nationalist Party politician C.R. Swart undoubtedly precipitated his departure. Ewer was the only senior academic who protested against the award. Ewer moved to Acrera to become Professor and Head of the newly-formed Zoology Department at the University of Ghana. There he had the task of developing a department from scratch. Whilst in Ghana he not only developed the undergraduate curriculum, but also a postgraduate school. He continued his research on neuromuscular physiology, turning his attention to echinoderms and platyhelminthes as well as publishing data from work done in South Africa. In addition he found time to co-author a number of books: Ecological Biology 1: Organisms and their Environments and Ecological Biology 2: The Inter-relations of Organisms, both edited by D.W. Ewer & J.B. Hall, published by Longman in 1972 and 1978; Ecological Biology: Practical Book 1 (1980) by D.W. Ewer, J.B. Hall & June Michelmore (1975), and Ecological Biology: Practical Book 2 (1980) by D.W. Ewer & J.B. Hall, both with corresponding Teacher’s Guides by the same authors. He also co-edited Ecological Biology: For A-level and Intermediate Students in Africa (D.W. Ewer, J.B. Hall & G.C. Clerk, eds), 1978. Whilst in Ghana he travelled extensively to other African countries as external examiner.

After ten years in Ghana, the Ewers moved back to England in 1973 where Griff died of cancer in 1975. Ewer worked for the Centre for Overseas Pest Research (COPR) in Kensington until about 1978, investigating the physiology of the eggs of grasshoppers. He also helped edit various COPR publications such as the Locust and Grasshopper Agricultural Handbook. Although he was not working at a university, he clearly maintained an interest in educational matters, for example publishing a paper entitled “Length, breadth and depth: reflections on the ‘Ecological Approach’” in the Journal of Biological Education in 1974.

In the late 1980s Jakes moved to the family home in the village of Great Missenden (Bucks). Shortly thereafter Stephanie Alexander enlisted his help with the publication of a two-volume translation of Travels in Southern Africa by Adulphe Delegorgue. For example it was Ewer who – at the age of 83 – enthusiastically translated from French the large butterfly section for Volume II that was published in 1997.

Ewer was a man of wide cultural interests. He had a passion for history and was especially keen on the theatre and Shakespeare. He was an active member of university drama productions in Pietermaritzburg and Grahamstown. Guy Butler remembered him as a fine Shakespearean actor, taking the lead in many performances. He also enjoyed the lighter side of drama and in Pietermaritzburg he appeared in the annual pantomimes, always as the dame.

Jakes Ewer lived an interesting and full life, embracing the sciences, arts and education. He leaves a daughter and a son, four grandchildren, two great-grandchildren and about 12 000 books that were his personal library.

REFERENCES

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