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**Raath, Michael A.; Rubidge, Bruce S.**

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# James William Kitching (1922–2003): a tribute

**Michael A. Raath & Bruce S. Rubidge**

*Bernard Price Institute for Palaeontological Research, School of Geosciences, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg*



ON 24 DECEMBER 2003, JAMES WILLIAM KITCHING, REGARDED by many as one of the world's greatest fossil finders, died at his home in Johannesburg. His passing marks the end of a pioneering era of palaeontological giants in South Africa.

James Kitching was born on 6 February 1922 in Graaff-Reinet, in the heart of the world-famous Karoo. At a very early age he was inducted into the fundamentals of field palaeontology when he went with his father and younger brothers collecting fossils for the legendary Dr Robert Broom in the mountains around the village of Nieu Bethesda, where he grew up. He found his first fossil at the age of six, and only a year later he found what turned out to be his first holotype specimen, which Broom named *Youngopsis kitchingi* in his honour. It was the first of many new species which he was to present to science over the next seven decades and more.

When in the early 1940s Robert Broom presented a lecture at the University of the Witwatersrand decrying the loss of the country's rich palaeontological heritage to erosion, he struck a receptive chord in one particular member of his audience, the financier Dr Bernard Price. Price responded with an offer of funds to establish a fossil collecting unit at the University, which culminated in the establishment of the Bernard Price Institute for Palaeontological Research (BPI) in 1945. When it sought candidates for its first staff appointment, Robert Broom had no hesitation in recommending his stripling fossil-finder from the Karoo, James Kitching.

Kitching had just been demobilized from active service in Italy at the end of World War II and started his work at Wits as the first – and at that time only – BPI staff member on 26 October 1945. Within weeks he was off on his first field trip, back to the Graaff-Reinet district where he had grown up and which he knew so well. Today there are few places in the Karoo which have not felt the tread of Kitching's boots in his search for fossils. In the process he spent many years away from home, walked many thousands of kilometres, often in the blistering heat of the parched Karoo, and collected many thousands of fossils which today grace major museum collections on all the major continents. Of the 53½ years that Kitching served the BPI, 215 months (just short of 18 years) were spent in the field collecting fossils.

Through his dedication and tireless exertions, the BPI today houses one of the largest fossil collections in the southern hemisphere. More than ninety per cent of the fossils making up those collections were collected by Kitching himself, assisted over the years by a number of field assistants, but especially his long-time field companion and friend, the late Regent Lukas Huma. These collections are today a strong research magnet drawing visiting palaeontologists to Wits from all continents of the globe, and they represent a lasting monument to his work and an abiding tribute to his memory.

His collecting of fossils of Karoo age was not confined to South Africa alone – he collected also in Zambia, Zimbabwe and Lesotho, as well as the U.S.A., Brazil and Argentina. One of the many highlights of his long and productive career was in 1970 when he was invited to Antarctica as part of the U.S.A.-Antarctic Research Programme. Here he was responsible for the first identification of fossil therapsids in Antarctica, identical to those he was accustomed to collecting in South Africa, thus providing further strong palaeontological evidence of former close continental links between southern Africa and Antarctica. One outcome of his spectacular successes in Antarctica is that one of its highland features is now officially named 'Kitching Ridge' in his honour.

Nor was Kitching's palaeontological work confined to the Karoo. On his appointment to the staff of the BPI, the brief given to him was that he should divide his time between collecting Permo-Triassic fossils in the Karoo and Plio-Pleistocene mammalian fossils from the dolomitic cave deposits at Makapansgat in the north of the country. At the latter locality he was involved with investigations at the Cave of Hearths and the famous Limeworks deposits, where in 1947 he made an important discovery – the first specimen of the 'ape-man', *Australopithecus*, to come from that site. Together with Raymond Dart he undertook pioneering taphonomic research on the bone accumulations at Makapansgat. This work led to visits to the Netherlands, Belgium and France to study Palaeolithic

mammalian faunas, and he was also involved in the analysis of fossils from Pinhole Cave in Derbyshire, England.

Although he did not have a standard undergraduate academic background, Kitching was granted special permission by the Senate of the University of the Witwatersrand to register for an M.Sc. degree based on his work in the Karoo. When his dissertation was submitted, its quality and comprehensiveness so impressed his examiners that they pressed for the university to award him a doctorate instead, which they did. At the time of his formal retirement at the age of 69 in 1990 he held appointments as Reader in Karoo Biostratigraphy and Acting Director of the Bernard Price Institute for Palaeontological Research at Wits University – ending up heading the institution which he had helped found as its first and most junior staff member. Following his retirement he was invited to become an Honorary Research Professorial Fellow of the Institute, an appointment he held up to his death.

Generations of students and palaeontologists from many parts of the world benefited from his encyclopaedic knowledge of the Karoo and its palaeontology, and many enjoyed his warm hospitality and friendly companionship on camping trips into the field, where he was ever ready to share his depth and breadth of knowledge and experience. Although not a prolific writer, his publications spanned a long and active career, and most have stood the test of time. He was active in publication right up to the end, the last paper to bear his name appearing just months before his death.

During his long career he received numerous awards, including honorary doctorates from the universities of Port Elizabeth (1981) and Wits (1996), the Gold Medal of the Zoological Society of South Africa (1993), the Draper Award of the Geological Society of South Africa (1993), and honorary life membership of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology in the U.S.A. (1993) as well as the prestigious Morris Skinner award of that Society three years before his death. He was a founder member of the Palaeontological Society of Southern Africa, served a two-year term as its President, and was elected an Honorary Member (the highest honour the Society can bestow) in 1992. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa in 1987.

Kitching remained a humble, self-effacing man throughout his life, despite the many accolades and honours bestowed on him by his peers during his long career. Above all, he was a family man, devoted to his wife of more than 50 years, Betty, and their three children. He lost his long battle with cancer on Christmas Eve, 2003.

We thank James Kitching's son, Matthew, for photographs used in this tribute.

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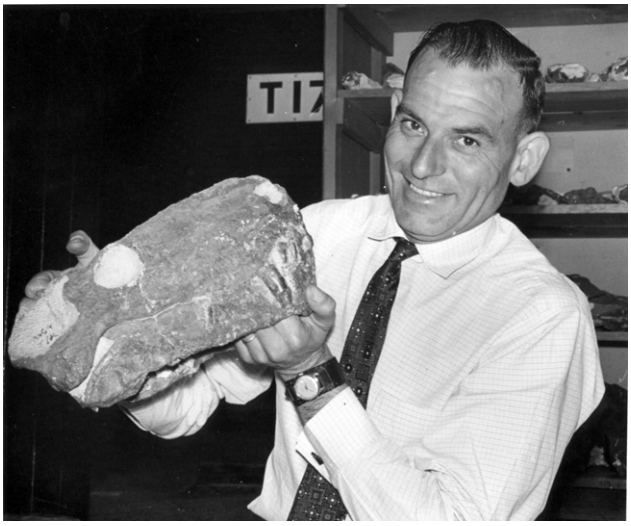
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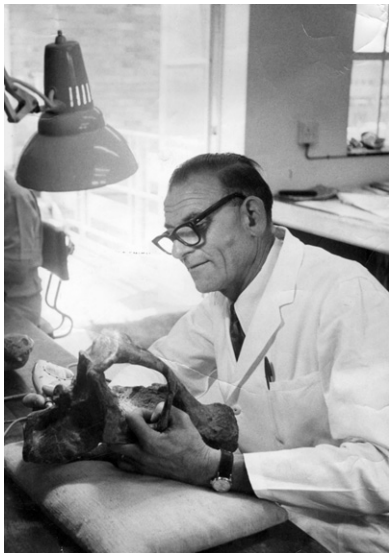


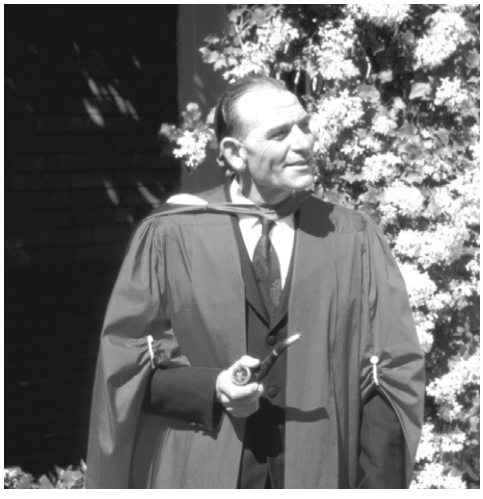

Kitching (far left) with other members of the US Antarctic Research Program team at Amundsen Glacier (1970).

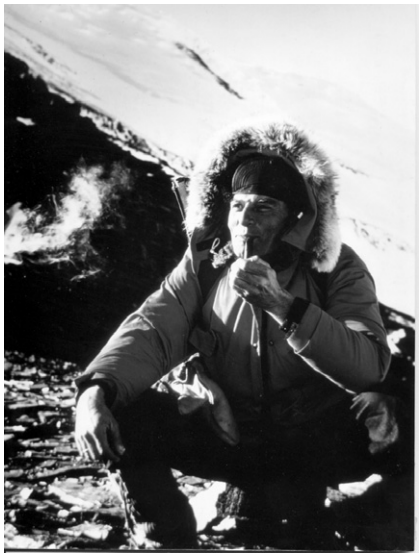




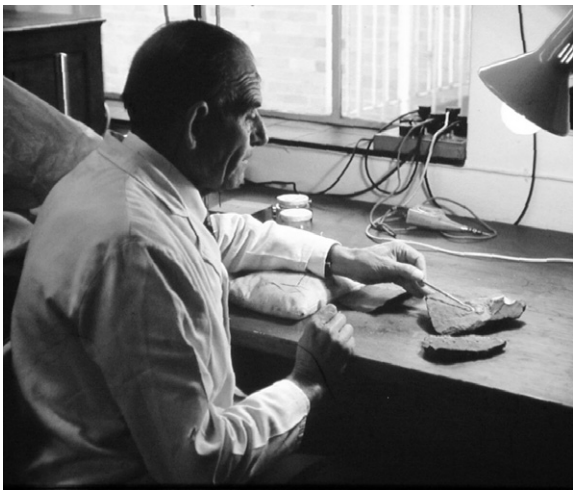

(left) Ever ready to share his knowledge with a young enquiring mind; (right) with a gorgonopsian skull collected from the Luangwa Valley, Zambia (1960/61; photograph: Die Suid Afrikaanse Stem).







(left) At work preparing a large *Theriognathus* skull (mid 1970s); (middle) Ph.D. graduation (1974); (right) smoke-break in the Antarctic (1970).



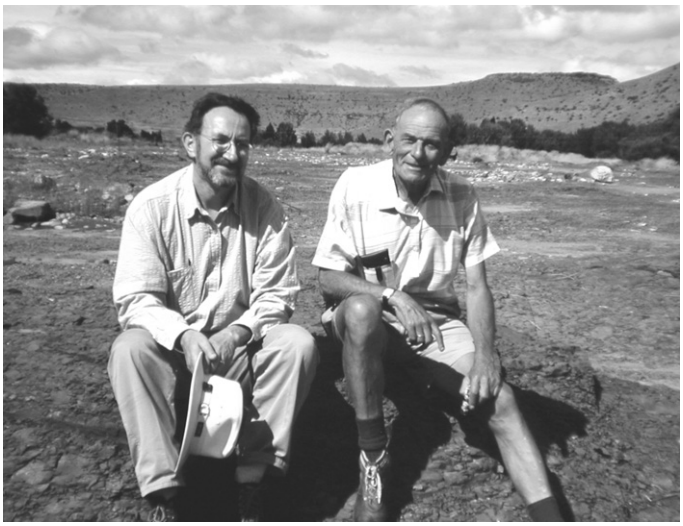


(left) With the world's oldest dinosaur eggs and embryos which he discovered in 1976; (right) with his field assistant and friend, Lukas Huma, on the occasion of his award for 25 years service to the university (1970).



Attentive group at Makapansgat Limeworks: Brian Maguire (extreme left); unknown (back to camera, wearing hat); Kitching; unknown (back to camera, hatless); Revil Mason; Raymond Dart; Phillip Tobias; unknown (extreme right, wearing hat) (late 1960s).





(left) Searching for tiny cynodonts in the Elliot Formation, eastern Free State (1980; photograph: M.A. Raath); (right) back where it all began for him, at Doornplaas in the Karoo, with a colleague from Canada, Robert Reisz (1997; photograph: B.S. Rubidge).