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A tribute to James William Kitching

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JAMES WILLIAM KITCHING

PhD (Witwatersrand), Hon. DSc (Port Elizabeth), FMLS, FRSSAfr.



Figure 1. James Kitching doing what he likes best - scouring steep hillsides for fossils: Elliot Formation, northern OFS.
Photo: M A Raath, 1979.

This volume is dedicated by the authors and editor to a remarkable man, James Kitching, in recognition of a lifetime of dedication to palaeontology, and in admiration of his contribution in a career which, in one form or another, has spanned virtually his entire life (thus far!).

He was born on 6 February 1922 in the picturesque small Eastern Cape town of Graaff-Reinet, a town which won further palaeontological recognition locally when it was proclaimed "Capital of a Re-united Gondwanaland" by the Palaeontological Society of Southern Africa when the Society met there in 1988. Appropriately, James Kitching presided over that meeting as President of the Society, and he inducted the Mayor of the town as "Mayor of Gondwanaland".

Kitching's long love-affair with fossils began in his childhood when the Kitchings – father and sons – fell



Figure 2. James Kitching (left), with two life-long friends and colleagues from the old days of the BPI: Edna Plumstead (Palaeobotanist, centre) and Raymond Dart (Anatomist and Palaeo-anthropologist), at the joint celebration of Dart's 90th birthday and the 60th anniversary of his announcement of the discovery of *Australopithecus* (February 1985).

Photo: C K Brain, 1985.

under the spell of the legendary Dr Robert Broom who had once lived not far away in the even smaller little "dorp" of Pearston, and still visited the district whenever he could. As Eve Palmer notes in her book, *The Plains of Camdeboo*, James' father was dubbed by Broom "the greatest fossil-hunter in the world"; but James he called "the greatest fossil-*finder*". That reputation has gone before him all his active life; he has been invited to find fossils on virtually all the world's continents. And find them he most certainly has. Nobody has yet tried to count the total number of individual fossil specimens found by James Kitching, and it is certainly a task well beyond the capabilities or energy of this chronicler.

All his working career has been spent in the service of the University of the Witwatersrand. He began work at the University in the newly founded Bernard Price Institute for Palaeontological Research immediately after his demobilization at the end of the 1939-45 World War. Initially appointed as a field collector, he split his time between the Karoo – where he concentrated on Permo-Triassic therapsid reptiles, and the Makapansgat caves – where he collected Plio-Pleistocene mammals including australopithecine hominids. He later won promotion to the academic staff of the Institute, where he was a respected researcher and teacher.

Based on his many years of work in the Karoo, and under the fatherly encouragement and scholarly guidance of the late S H Haughton, he compiled a doctoral thesis on the biozonation of the Beaufort Group, the degree being awarded in 1973. In 1981 the University of Port Elizabeth honoured him with a DSc (*honoris causa*) in honour of his contribution to palaeontology, and in 1983 his own university honoured him by appointing him Reader in Karoo Biostratigraphy. During the period 1987 to 1990 he directed the activities of the Institute which he had joined as a junior technician four decades earlier. The metamorphosis was now complete – the little lad, Jim, from the unsophisticated, rural Karoo village of Nieu Bethesda near Graaff-Reinet had transformed into Professor James Kitching of the University of the Witwatersrand in cosmopolitan, sophisticated Johannesburg.

And always beside him, a loyal supporter in all he has ever done, has been his wife Betty – who, though sharing with him his deep love of the outdoors, has been content to be the home maker, remaining behind to make a secure and warm home base for their family of three children. Daughters Marie and Felicity are now off raising families of their own. Son Matthew has followed Father into earth science; what is more, he has inherited something of Father's eye for fossils in the field.

James Kitching's career has formed a living link with some of the legends of South African and world palaeontology: the Abbé Breuil, Robert Broom, Ned Colbert, Raymond Dart, S H Haughton, F R Parrington, Frank Peabody, Al Romer, S H Rubidge, D M S Watson, and many, many more. He knew them all, and could count most of them among his personal friends. Whenever foreign palaeontologists visit South Africa, James is virtually always their first port of call because

of his ability to orientate them and show them what's what, fossil-wise.

He is an ideal person with students, because of his affinity for young people, especially those with even a vague liking for fossils or the great outdoors. He himself likes few things better than a camping trip into the bush, and none can pick a better, more comfortable, or more appropriate camp-site – even in the apparently inhospitable, treeless, vast emptiness of the Karoo. In his highly organized camps, around the camp-fire at night, he is a tale-teller without peer; out on the veld, youngsters less than half his age struggle vainly to match the pace of his long, striding, biltong legs – and usually it is *he* who is carrying all the heavy finds in the bulging rucksack on his back! When others are wilting from heat or are parched from thirst, thankfully flopping into the merciful shade of whatever is handy, James is off up the mountainside in pursuit of another tantalizing rock exposure or a harvest of tempting prickly pears. And if he goes there, you can be sure he will not come back empty-handed.

This phenomenal man has served palaeontology with humility and great distinction for more than five decades. From his pen have flowed more than 40 scientific papers and one book, as well as numerous informal articles, reports, contributions to guide-books for field excursions, and the other sort of necessary but unacknowledged writings which the busy working scientist is called upon to produce. Countless students from countless institutions have benefitted from his advice and guidance, as have countless colleagues from countless countries – sometimes, let it be said, without adequate acknowledgement of the help they have received from him. But he is always there to help them next time ...

By dedicating this collection of papers to him, we his colleagues and friends salute him at the time of his formal "retirement" from the University. Retirement, though, never stopped a Kitching, and many more productive years lie ahead. We all look forward to what is yet to come.

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