

PREFACE

This Festschrift volume of *Palaeontologia africana* celebrates the career of Professor Bruce Sidney Rubidge, a luminary of South African palaeontology and one of the ‘Gods of the Karoo’. The contributing authors to this volume represent a wide swath of Bruce’s students, colleagues, and friends – three categories that are by no means mutually exclusive. Their academic papers and remembrances stand as testament to Bruce’s impact on the palaeosciences, particularly our understanding of the evolution of life on land. Bruce retired from the University of the Witwatersrand during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when regulations proscribed in-person gatherings, especially the sort of celebration that he deserved after such an impressive career. It is our sincere hope that this volume serves as an academic celebration worthy of Bruce’s achievements.

Bruce’s contributions to science have been far-ranging: his publications cover everything from pollen to mammals and span the Devonian to the Pleistocene (considering only the peer-reviewed scientific literature; when including his writings for general audiences and textbooks, they encompass the entirety of Earth history). With this noted, the papers in this Festschrift have been chosen to reflect his particular research focus: Permo-Triassic tetrapods, especially as concerns their biostratigraphy and biogeography. Especially well-represented are contributions on the fauna of the Karoo Supergroup, an area of study where Bruce ranks among the most influential scientists in history, based on the combination of his published output, decades of fieldwork, efforts as educator and mentor, and capacity building in South Africa.

The Festschrift begins with two articles providing historical context and personal remembrances of Bruce’s career, the first by his former students Dr John Hancox (Ph.D. Wits 1998) and Dr Michael Day (Ph.D. Wits 2013) and the second by his colleague Dr Mike Raath (University Curator of Collections; retired). Following these, the Festschrift continues with research articles; seven of which were prepared for publication in time for the Festschrift’s launch, to which others will be added over the remainder of the year. We hope Bruce is happy to see the initial set of papers hit on a variety of his pet topics (such as the bizarre therapsid group Burnetiamorpha, the fauna of the *Tapinocephalus* Assemblage Zone, the ‘wanderlust’ of Permian synapsids between the Southern and Northern Hemispheres, and bringing the early history of Karoo fossil hunting into a modern geological framework) as well as building on the practical advances implemented at the ESI under his leadership (such as in digital imaging and chronostratigraphy).

Before diving into the meat of things, however, we wish to share a few highlights of Bruce’s literal and figurative early years as recounted by his wife, Marina, and his friend and colleague, the late Dr William J. ‘Billy’ de Klerk. We then finish this preface with two montages depicting our photographic memories of time well spent together. On behalf of the editors (J.N.C., K.E.J.C., and C.F.K.) and all the authors, we wish Bruce a happy and productive retirement in Graaff-Reinet and look forward to his continued early morning phone calls to discuss the future of palaeosciences in South Africa.

Assorted tales of Bruce Sidney Rubidge, from Marina and Billy

It was evident early that the future Professor Rubidge was keen on palaeontology. When Bruce was three years old, his grandfather Sidney handed over operations at the family farm (Wellwood, near Graaff-Reinet) to Bruce’s father and moved three kilometres away to a smaller house, Trymore. Undaunted by the distance and already passionate about fossils, a tender young Bruce would often ride his beloved tricycle from the main homestead down to visit his grampa and watch him prepare his latest treasures.

At about this time some cement repairs were being done to a grid at the Wellwood homestead. Bruce came upon a chunk of discarded concrete, complete with a protruding rusty nail.

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He was absolutely delighted with this finding and proclaimed that it was a fossil. He jumped excitedly onto his tricycle and once more cycled the sandy road to Trymore to show his grandfather. Sidney did not dismiss the discovery, being the wise man that he was, but instead asked Bruce to leave it with him for further preparation. Sidney carefully drew in some teeth and chiseled in eyes and a nose. Bruce was delighted with this first ‘fossil’ find, and has remained enthused ever since. The wise grandfather Sidney would be enormously proud.



Figure 1. Bruce Rubidge’s ‘first fossil’, in the hand of former student Cameron Penn-Clarke, in front of the row of Permian dicynodont skulls displayed at his grandfather’s museum in Wellwood. Students of Karoo reptiles will note a distinct resemblance to actual pareiasaur skulls found in the area.

From these auspicious beginnings, Bruce went on to earn a B.Sc. Honours *cum laude* (Palaeontology) from the University of Stellenbosch in 1979. He was appointed to his first academic job the next year as Associate Curator of Karoo Palaeontology at the National Museum, Bloemfontein. By January 1981, Bruce was Head of Department, enrolled in an M.Sc. programme, and conscripted for his compulsory two years of military experience. Ably navigating these weighty commitments, he arranged for his military service to be conducted at the Fort, a military museum in Bloemfontein, where he worked in the mornings. He then hopped on his old bicycle and rode to the National Museum for his ‘afternoon shift’. Finally, he rode home to continue work on his courses and degree well into the evenings!

During this period, despite his hectic schedule, Bruce also managed to develop the Evolution of Life on Earth public exhibit at the National Museum, together with Ron Clarke (the palaeoanthropologist who needs no introduction) and artist Audrey van Eeden. This exhibit is still in use today and has been seen by hundreds of thousands of visitors over the last 40 years. The Evolution of Life on Earth exhibit features a beautiful, complete fossil of a Jurassic ichthyosaur brokered on an exchange from Germany. Bruce waited months for its arrival, only to find that it was in cold storage at the Durban Docks. An invoice from the warehouse arrived at the Museum – and demanded a veterinary certificate before the crate could be released from the care of South African customs!

Bruce went on to finish his PhD in 1990, and accepted the position as Director of the Bernard Price Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand that year, following the retirement of Dr James Kitching. Bruce and James were fast friends, sharing many years together in the field, finding fossils and training students. They were united by a love of fossils and frugality, one time strapping a cured half-mutton to the roof of the inadequately-sized replacement for a broken-down field vehicle so that the field trip could go on.

In his new post at Wits, Bruce also continued his lifelong friendship with National Museum preparator John Nyaphuli. Bruce worked with John for many years, excavating and preparing the holotype of *Tapinocaninus pamela*, a thick-headed dinocephalian named after Bruce's mother Pam (due to her encouragement of Bruce's career). When Bruce decided to loan the specimen for further preparation and study at Wits, he made it a family vacation, loading the Rubidge crew into a giant tipper truck with hissing air brakes and steaming down the N1 at a top speed of 80km/hr. After loading the gigantic specimen using block and tackle in Bloemfontein, the family began the return trip to Johannesburg – with an increasingly frustrated Bruce trying to coax a few more km/hr out of the vehicle by fiddling constantly with the buttons on the dashboard. The folly of this enterprise became evident when the tip bed started to lift on the N1, threatening to dump a holotype specimen and many years of work onto the highway at top speed! Luckily, Bruce noticed in time and curbed the vehicle before any damage was done. No one is sure whether Bruce ever told John of this near-extinction of their beloved specimen, but it certainly made for a memorable holiday.

Needless to say, Bruce flourished in his new position, bringing the BPI (now the ESI) thirty years of tireless stewardship and remarkable scientific achievements. To tell that story properly, we now hand over to Drs Hancox, Day, and Raath, who complete the introduction to this Festschrift. Tot wedersiens in die Karoo!

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Marina Rubidge



From left to right, top to bottom: Sidney, Bruce, Marina and Mark Rubidge; Bruce Rubidge at Avita Farm, Marseilles, 1991 (unknown photographer); Bruce Rubidge, Michael Day and Sifelani Jirah in the field (unknown photographer); Emese Bordy and Bruce Rubidge on Fraserburg Road, 2014 (by Pia Viglietti); Julien Benoit, David Groenewald, Aliéanor Duhamel, Eva-Maria Bendel, Bruce Rubidge, Marc Van den Brandt, Kévin Rey, Frank Schie, Michael Day, Sifelani Jirah and Marco Romano in the field in the *Tapinocephalus* Assemblage Zone, 2018 (by Marco Romano); Bruce Rubidge (unknown photographer); Bruce Rubidge (unknown photographer); Bruce Rubidge at the University of the Witwatersrand, 2009 (by Cynthia Kemp); John Hancox, Li Jinling and Bruce Rubidge, 1996 (unknown photographer).



From left to right, top to bottom: Bruce Rubidge in the field in Laingsberg, South Africa, 2016 (by Vincent Fernandez); Bruce Rubidge, Paul October, Roger Smith, Annelise Crean, and John Nyaphuli (unknown photographer); Bruce Rubidge in the field (unknown photographer); James Kitching and Bruce Rubidge at the James Kitching Gallery opening, 1998 (unknown photographer); Vincent Fernandez, Sifelani Jirah, Leandro Gaetano, Marc Van den Brandt, Frank Schie, Bruce Rubidge and David Groenewald in the field in Laingsberg, South Africa, 2016 (by Vincent Fernandez); Bruce Rubidge, Ruksana Osman, Jonah Choiniere, Marion Bamford, and Rob Veale at the University of the Witwatersrand, 2019 (unknown photographer); Bruce Rubidge in the field (unknown photographer); Mike Raath, James Kitching and Bruce Rubidge at the Bernard Price Institute, 1996 (unknown photographer); Bruce Rubidge in his office at the University of the Witwatersrand, 2009 (by Cynthia Kemp); Kimi Chapelle and Bruce Rubidge at the University of the Witwatersrand graduation ceremony, 2013 (by Jonah Choiniere).