

## Obituary

### Robert Louis Cecil Pilgrim

26 August 1921 – 7 April 2010

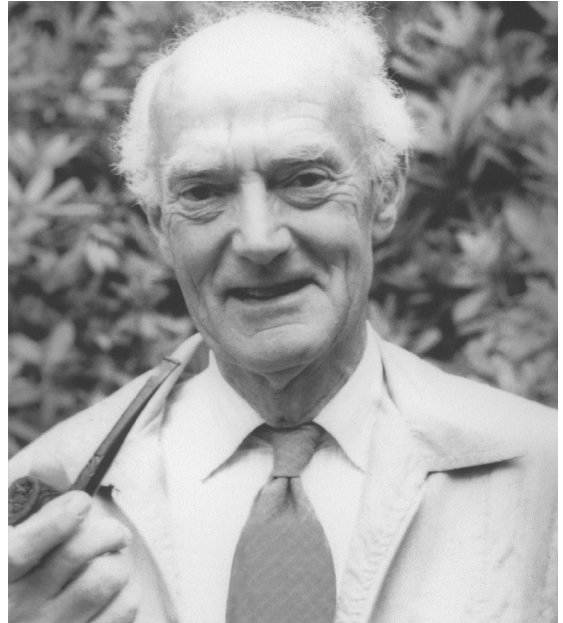
Professor R.L.C. (Bob) Pilgrim died suddenly at home of a heart attack, after spending the evening working on his monograph of the flea larvae of the world. Bob was a holistic scientist, a natural historian of the old school, with an extensive knowledge of biology in its broadest meaning and demonstrated in his many publications spanning the disciplines of morphology, physiology and parasitology as well as entomology. Above all he was a teacher who took great pride in the work of his students during the almost 40 years he was a lecturer at the University of Canterbury.

Bob was born in Christchurch, New Zealand. His lifelong interest in biology began at an early age. He and two schoolmates established what they called the Onslow Museum Society, referring to its location in Onslow St. They were desperately anxious to purchase an authoritative manual to assist in the identification and classification of shells. However, its purchase was beyond their financial means, so they wrote to the Minister of Education, Peter Fraser, who sent them the precious book as a personal gift.

When his father's business collapsed during the depression of the 1930s he was forced to leave Christchurch Boys' High School at age 16 and his dream of becoming a medical doctor was shattered. He soon obtained a job as a public servant, first with the Department of Agriculture and later in Social Security, until he was 21. Bob enrolled as a part-time student at the Canterbury College (later to become the University of Canterbury) in 1939, and he completed his Bachelor of Science degree in May 1943.

His hope of immediate graduate studies was curtailed when he was called for war service. After training in Trentham his scientific knowledge led to his recruitment as a biochemist and diagnostician in a hospital of the New Zealand Army Medical Corps in New Caledonia. When the hospital was disbanded, Bob entered Burnham Army Camp. He was scheduled to sail with reinforcements to Italy in 1944, but was released from the army to perform an essential occupation as research assistant in the unit dealing with artificial insemination of cattle in the Ruakura Animal Research Station, near Hamilton. His work at Ruakura lasted until 1946, when he was appointed an assistant lecturer in zoology at Canterbury College. He was able to resume his studies, and graduated with a Master in Science in zoology with equivalent first-class honours. He then travelled to England in December 1948, where he undertook research on the physiology of oysters at London's University College, gaining a Ph.D. in 1951.

On his return to Christchurch Bob was appointed as lecturer at Canterbury College, and then promoted to senior lecturer in 1954. In 1958, he was awarded a postdoctoral fellowship to undertake research at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, and at the Friday Harbor Laboratories of the University of



**Figure 1.** Professor Pilgrim at age 67, while attending the XVIII International Congress of Entomology held in Vancouver, Canada, in July 1988.

Washington, where he worked on crustacean neurophysiology. In 1963, Bob was promoted to reader at Canterbury, and was awarded a grant to continue his research at the Marine Biological Association in Plymouth. From England, he travelled to Italy to extend his research at the Stazione Zoologica in Naples. He made major contributions to the field of invertebrate neurophysiology, and this led to his establishing the physiology laboratory and physiology course in the Department of Zoology - a course that up to that time was given only at medical schools. Bob was also the driving force behind the establishment of biochemistry and biophysics as teaching disciplines at Canterbury, and was appointed as the faculty's coordinator for the two subjects. His appointment to the second Chair of Zoology in 1965 saw his teaching and research activities reduce as he assumed more administrative responsibilities. Noted for his efficiency, he was appointed the Dean of the Faculty of Science from 1967 until 1969. He also became the secretary of the Lecturers' Association, a lecturers' representative on the Professorial Board, and represented the University on the Papanui High School Board of Governors. He also served as Chairman of the Canterbury Branch of the Association of University Teachers, as council member of the Royal Society of New Zealand as well as president of its Canterbury Branch, and as vice-president of the New Zealand Science Teachers' Association. However, his greatest administrative interest within the University related to his lifelong love affair with books; he was a member of the Library Committee for nine years, the last three as chairman.

The time and effort taken by all these administrative positions meant that neurophysiology research had to be abandoned because it required long and sustained hours of laboratory work,

so Bob turned to entomology and discovered the aquatic larva and the pupa of the only species of scorpion fly living in New Zealand. However, the subject that delighted Bob most, and which took the greatest part of his time and effort after he left neurophysiology, was parasitology. He collected and researched ectoparasites from birds, mammals and marine fishes for the rest of his life, amassing very large collections of lice and fleas, mainly from New Zealand hosts but also from Australian ones. He donated his collections to Te Papa, where they are now permanently curated.

Bob was extremely concerned with the quality of spoken and written scientific language, and blamed schools for the poor language skills of some students entering university, wondering how they would become good scientists if they were not able to show in their writing that they had observed rules of grammar and spelling.

In 1983, after almost 40 years working at the University, Bob decided to retire early to dedicate full-time to the study of flea larvae. During his 'retirement' Bob searched relentlessly for flea larvae representing as many families and genera as possible. He visited Canada, U.S.A., China, Russia, England and Slovakia to meet colleagues working on flea larvae. He taught himself to read papers in Russian and in Chinese since much of the relevant literature had been written in those languages. He developed an innovative technique to dissect, slide-mount and examine the larvae, and used SEM photography to interpret and confirm the nature of anatomical structures he had seen in slide-mounted specimens. He prepared over 8,000 slides of fleas, and amassed what is almost certainly the largest and most diverse collection of flea larvae in the world. Bob was an active member of the Entomological Society of New Zealand for 40 years and was President from 1987–1989. His professionalism, friendly personality, and unique sense of humour were a feature of the annual meetings of the Society.

At the time of his death, Bob had been associated with Canterbury University for more than 70 years, as a student, lecturer, professor, researcher, administrator, emeritus professor and, above all, as a highly respected member of the university community. He was highly regarded for his professionalism, efficiency, punctuality, friendliness, sense of humour, and honesty. Although Bob will not see his 'retirement project' on fleas in print, the entomological world will receive its benefits, thanks to the efforts of friend and colleague Terry Galloway, who will complete the manuscript for publication.

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