

# Reminiscences of Brian G. Gardiner (1932–2021)

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Professor Brian G. Gardiner (born October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1932), a British paleontologist and zoologist, passed away at the age of 88 on January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021. We received this sad news with deep regret. Linked for more than sixty-five years to various academic institutions in London, Brian became an influential scientist, recognized and appreciated worldwide, both for his original contributions to the study of fossil fish and for his personal charisma. He will be remembered as a first class supervisor of students of various nationalities. In this last aspect he left a Gardinerian School scattered over the five continents. His scientific career was very early related to the paleontological collections of The Natural History Museum (NHMUK). There he cultivated best friends among colleagues and participated in controversial discussion circles made up mostly of paleontologists, ichthyologists, entomologists, and botanists. He was even reputed to have been a founding member of a little but noisy “gang of four” ichthyologists (Reid *et al.* 2021). Over the years, an extraordinary international network of academic relationships and friends was built around Brian Gardiner.

He carried out fruitful teaching duties as a staff member of Queen Elizabeth College (1958–1985) and King’s College (1985–1998), University of London. He also was particularly proactive as a Fellow of the Linnean Society of London (1968–2021), where he made outstanding contributions as the editor of several publications. Most people agree that Brian was highly regarded in his duties as President of the society between 1994 and 1997. Throughout his life he demonstrated an extraordinary gift for making science available to the non-specialist, with a penchant for the history of natural history. His written work includes,

in addition to the results of his mostly paleontological research, early papers on applied entomology, not a few popular science articles and numerous editorials in *The Linnean* (Berwick *et al.* 2021). He was also an eloquent and entertaining storyteller.

I was honored to have Brian Gardiner as co-supervisor, along with Richard (Dick) Vane-Wright from the Department of Entomology at the NHM during my doctoral studies under a combined agreement between the museum and King’s College London (1995–1998), funded by the British Council and the Venezuelan Council for Science and Technology (CONICIT). For a little over three years I was supported by Brian, although our interactions were neither frequent nor very intense. As of the date I write these lines, three obituaries have been published (Reid *et al.* 2021; Richter 2021; Reid 2021). These profiles contain many data and essential information about Brian, both personal and professional, much of which was previously unknown to me.

For the enjoyment I had of his paternal friendship and the contagious enthusiasm that encouraged me to become an independent professional, I wanted to celebrate his memory with some anecdotes that show much less his academic side than his great and commendable human nature.

### MEETING BRIAN

Nervous, as a newly arrived student, and secretly tormented by a tense expectation of a first personal meeting with the President of the celebrated Linnean Society of London, I had come imagining on the way that I was

going to be received with excess of English formality by a thin academic nerd, phlegmatic and irritable. However, I was stunned to find myself in front of a cheerful, disheveled, modern Viking, whose face immediately revealed a broad smile, followed by the funniest laughs I could hear that week. That morning I met a dynamic character, full of enthusiasm and slightly explosive, whose voice volume was as high as that of any inhabitant of my Caribbean birthplace, Maracaibo.

My memories of this first visit to Brian's office, escorted by one of his dearest friends, Dick Vane-Wright, at the former Queen Elizabeth College on Campden Hill Road (a property that I understand was sold and vacated by the University of London in 2000) are somewhat fuzzy. The place wasn't very spacious, and it looked pretty messy. The typical abode of someone with a long backlog of work, with a mountain of papers on his desk, bathed in the autumn light that came in from what looked like a garden behind a large window. Among its remarkable exotic ornaments, I remember by its size, a kind of Victorian lamp or ashtray, whose base was made with the stuffed foot of an African elephant. I saw some yellowish fish bones in small boxes – too familiar to me – and some fossils in jars. On one wall I spotted a billboard with university news and photographs in which I could make out the image of my friend Gavin C. Young, an Australian paleontologist, whom I had been assisting in western Venezuela, recovering fossil fish from the Devonian of the Sierra de Perijá, for two or three weeks, in July 1992. "You know, he's a good lad. Like you, Gavin was my doctoral student about twenty years ago" said Brian with a distinctive accent, giving me with these words a strange tranquility and the first feeling that his presence there at King's College fulfilled the universal function of the Linnaean teacher, who could count his disciples scattered throughout the world.

The conversation between those four walls was short. After finding out if my arrival in the country had been pleasant, Brian excused himself from having to be my formal supervisor at the University of London: "I am a fish paleontologist, but I did have something to do with entomology in my youth. Maybe I will be of some help to you". He then blamed Dick for my fate, and assured me that by sticking with Dick, my *de facto* supervisor, there would be no reason to worry. My studies on butterfly taxonomy at the NHM would have guaranteed all possible success, I also could count on the support of the Linnean Society of London, and saying this, always with a smile, he handed

me a form that I had to fill out to request my membership. By signing at the bottom of the page, he exclaimed "with this recommendation they will not be able to deny you a fellowship" \*.

Whenever I went to visit Brian at college, I found him willing to solve quickly any situation that threatened my student stability, and he talked about irksome matters, such as financing to undertake this or that goal, with paternal cordiality and without worrying about the future (although everything seemed impossible to me). It did not matter much that it was very early, Brian was infallible in saying that his office was a boring place and we had to get out of there "to continue the discussion". That was the perfect excuse that midday in October to make me walk with him to Kensington Church Street and enjoy his hospitable invitation to lunch in one of the most picturesque and enjoyable pubs I have known in London: The Churchill Arms. The place, covered with climbing plants and flowers, was still fully operative early in 2020. Two steps before entering the pub, Brian made a feint and stopped. He explained to us –this time leaving aside his smile– that it was a homely place with excellent service, but that he always solemnly remembered his father right there at the door, because during the years of the world war in which Churchill held the position of Prime Minister, his father, a man of the working class and member of a trades union, had suffered severely from the political situation of the time (because of Churchill, or at least something like that as I understood. My English was still pretty basic and at that point both Brian and Dick had forgotten to speak a little slower to make it easier for me to understand). "However, it is good to read Churchill". Twenty years later I stumbled across Churchill's name on the spine of a book collection at a second hand book shop. Remembering that loose phrase of old Brian, I decided to buy at a bargain price the complete works of the English writer and statesman, the only edition that I know in Spanish. Its reading is not wasted.

#### BRIAN BLESSES MY ICHTHYOLOGICAL DOOM

When I was able to express myself better in English I tried to explain to Brian Gardiner that not only did I not worry about having a fish paleontologist as a tutor, but that I felt good among some of his colleagues, who were part of an academic and social circle in whose meetings I had oc-

\* I inexplicably never filled out the Linnean Society fellowship form. I cannot come up with a reasonable excuse, I just keep it on file, signed by Brian Gardiner in blue fountain pen ink.

casual access. In my beginnings as a biology student in Venezuela, I joined an incipient university museum whose director, José Moscó, was an ichthyologist. Subsequently, the need for an income led me to accept his offer to work as one of his research assistants in ichthyology for at least six years. I also interacted frequently with other ichthyologists in the country, especially those who were mostly interested in freshwater fauna. I did a lot of fieldwork with ichthyologists, always carrying my butterfly net. Then, I would have liked to dedicate more time to the study of butterflies, but through this job I learned a lot about fish morphology, systematics and ecology. Likewise, I frequently collaborated with the paleontology section directed by John Moody, Jr., who made numerous remarkable discoveries of fossil fish remains in locations near our city. His academic peers included specialists such as Gavin C. Young (then at the Australian Bureau of Mineral Resources) and John G. Maisey (American Museum of Natural History), who visited us in Venezuela. Both researchers had had close connections with groups and “gangs” from London. Brian listened to these anecdotes with delight and even playfully suggested that perhaps I was somehow doomed to suffer a curse with the ichthyologists.

#### BRIAN’S OBSESSION WITH LAMPREYS

Just two weeks after meeting Brian, Dick Vane-Wright came to see me in the basement of the Entomology building at the NHM. He told me that that evening we had an invitation from Brian Gardiner to dinner at Gina Douglas’ home, the librarian (currently Honorary Archivist) of the Linnean Society. We left the museum together, I still had to be guided in London. That place had a complete gastronomic basement, a kitchen-diner that took up all the visible space, full of pots, pans, and kitchen implements hanging on the walls. A large glass door gave way to the patio, and at some point it was opened to allow the exit of the exhalations of the smokers, and the equilibrium of the indoor temperature. The atmosphere was extremely cordial and jubilant, particularly due to the warm hospitality of the hosts, Gina and her husband John Parmenter, Official Chef of the evening. Judging by the guests and the main course, I have no doubt that the idea for that meeting came from the collaboration of Brian and the owners of the house. Among the guests were some members of the host family, and several scientists, Brian Gardiner, of course, Philippe Janvier paleontologist at the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris, Dave Johnson, ichthyologist at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, Colin Patterson (notable paleontologist at the NHM and

Brian’s favorite colleague), Dick Vane-Wright, and myself (entomologists). The excitement of the evening, exalted by the combination of excellent wines, beers, spirits and liqueurs, revolved around the exquisite main course: wild lampreys in green sauce.

Frankly, I don’t remember much else on the menu except that it was served with potatoes, salad, and probably some bread. There were also cheeses and desserts and some amaretti, whose paper wrappers when touched with a flame in a certain way rose in the air, rapidly burning up above the table as if by magic. As I later learned from a recent conversation with Gina, the special recipe was contributed by Dr. Janvier: *Matelote de Lamproie*; oh là là, haute cuisine française! (Janvier 2001). However, apparently the confusion of the supplier of these primitive jawless organisms meant that younger, tender individuals, did not reach the pot. The result was black cylinders of rubbery, hard-to-chew meat that some of the ichthyologists refused to taste. My memory is that despite that texture, the flavors of the lampreys and the sauce were quite pleasant to my palate. I ate a good portion. For a South American accustomed to consuming game mammals and birds, a diversity of fish and some reptiles (turtles, boas, alligators and iguanas) the exoticism of such a gastronomic rendezvous with that breed of primitive Craniata was superlative. Years later, we would recall on different occasions, with Brian, Dick or Gina, the unforgettable texture of those “bike tubes”. Much of the night Brian gave us lessons in the history of lampreys as a favorite dish of noble people and the English Royalty. He insisted on telling me how King Henry I of England had died after a sumptuous banquet of lampreys (just when I was chewing my part). I am sure that it was not to scare me but to entertain the diners with really far-fetched stories, which he later published in a well-documented popular article (Gardiner 2001). Now, I have come to recognize that this was the moment Brian chose to celebrate the apotheosis of his interest in the superclass Agnatha. Interest that went far beyond mere biology. This was another of the characteristics of the Brian that I knew.

Except for two moments in 1999, in which I had to sit down to finish pending tasks for a decade, the ritual of the “lamprey supper” represented in my career the end of a long and involuntary affair with ichthyology. Interestingly, it was also my first social engagement in Britain. With the passing of time, the memories of those who attended that eccentric appointment, and my progressive awareness of the diverse and remarkable nature of the diners, would reveal to me not only that this was not a trivial occasion, but that since my landing on the other side of the Atlantic, my studies were not at all sponsored by ordinary men.



At the famous “lampreys supper” in London, October 19, 1995. From left to right, Dick Vane-Wright, FLS (later, Keeper of Entomology at the Natural History Museum, 1998–2004), Brian G. Gardiner (President of the Linnean Society, 1994–1997), Ángel L. Vilorio (later, Director of the Venezuelan Institute of Scientific Research, 2008–2011) and Melissa Parmenter (currently a renowned composer and film producer) (photo: Matty Pye).

## BRIAN, THE PILTDOWN MAN AND THE BBC

Occasionally Brian came to the basement of the NHM’s entomology building asking about the Venezuelan boy. It could be just to say hello, peep at my brown butterflies, or to check my progress. One day he gave me a kind of pamphlet called *The Piltdown Hoax. Who done it*, which he had written with Andy Currant, from the Department of Paleontology (Gardiner & Currant 1996). I read it with interest on the train home. Since K. P. Oakley discovered by chemical methods the fraudulent nature of the remains of the “Piltdown man” in the early 1950s, this case is universally recognized as one of the most infamous scientific scams; however, it continues to be a matter of discussion and controversy, since apparently there is not yet conclusive evidence that irrevocably incriminates any of the several suspects of its authorship (Stringer 2012). In that rare publication (now available online), Brian and Andy hypothesized that the Lamarckian zoologist Martin A. C. Hinton, then an employee at the British Museum, would have stained fragments of a thick human skull and a worn out chimpanzee jaw. This unscrupulous character, pur-

posely sowed them together, with some animal remains and faked primitive artifacts, and buried all in an area of Piltdown Common (Sussex, England) in order to deceive and ridicule Dr. Arthur Smith Woodward of the Geology Department of the museum, in a kind of vendetta for past problems between them. This new hypothesis (different from others that incriminate archaeologist Charles Dawson or even Jesuit philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin) emerged from the discovery of a trunk belonging to Hinton in which there were some chemical-stained animal bones similar to the alleged remains of the Piltdown man (Gee 1996, Gardiner 2003).

One afternoon, shortly after receiving that curious little account, I was called by Brian asking me to see him in a room in the NHM Department of Paleontology, where he was meeting a Latin American reporter. He asked me to be his translator in an interview that they were going to carry out for BBC Radio in Spanish in relation to his theory of the Piltdown hoax. I immediately crossed the lower and upper corridors of the museum, which led me to the indicated office. There was Brian and his lady Mexican reporter, standing up in front of a table on which there rested a

tray containing all the pieces of the Piltdown puzzle. That day I had been photographing type specimens of butterflies as part of the routine work of my doctoral research, so I brought my camera to the interview. I did not want to miss the opportunity to save a graphic memory of the occasion. Two more people were present, (probably) Andy Currant and the curator of the collection, who immediately scowled when he saw me walking in with a camera. The reporter certainly spoke English better than I did, but she needed to do and record the interview in Spanish. So, questions were asked in my language, I translated them into English, Brian answered in English and I interpreted and communicated the answer in Spanish. From time to time they would chat with each other in English and at one of those moments I asked if I could take some photos. Brian approved my request and that is how I managed just two captures before the curator forbade me to continue. He did not want the images to be used for publication (which I am doing today for the first time, still with Brian's permission).

A Venezuelan friend, the distinguished essayist Miguel Ángel Campos, with whom I was in constant correspondence during my student stay in London, wrote to me a month later saying that he had heard me on the BBC talking about the Piltdown man on his Grundig shortwave radio. He removed that old device from a Mercedes Benz and installed it in his little Chevette, to which he added a booster to enhance the reception of his antenna. When and where did this episode occur? One midday, just driving in front of the Rectorate building of the University of Zulia, in Maracaibo, where I had had my first interview



Brian G. Gardiner interviewed for BBC Radio in Spanish. The program was recorded in the Department of Paleontology of the Natural History Museum, London, 1996, and subsequently broadcast several times on shortwave for the BBC *World Service* audience.



The largest portion of the Piltdown man's skull, held by Brian Gardiner. The Natural History Museum, London, 1996.

with the representatives of the British Council when I was looking for a scholarship to study in England. Apparently Brian's voice was not broadcast, and although it was mentioned that he was accompanied in the interview by his student Ángel Vilorio, the conduction of the program was ambiguous and the listeners possibly believed that the well-reputed Professor Gardiner of King's College London, was speaking to the world in fluent Spanish.

It was all a great coincidence. Probably the only regular user of a shortwave radio in 1996 in Maracaibo, was Miguel Ángel Campos. That story –a bit unbelievable and even embarrassing for me for inadvertently impersonating the interviewee– absolutely fascinated Brian. Miguel Ángel came to London to visit me for a month in the spring of 1997, but unfortunately I did not get a chance to introduce him to Brian. It would have been the perfect moment to close this story.

#### BRIAN GARDINER, SUPERVISOR AND FRIEND

On the day of my viva, Brian and Dick waited for me very early in the morning in one of the upper galleries of the Natural History Museum. Unlike the rules that govern the Venezuelan academy, supervisors in England could not be present at the examination, at least not in 1998. While Dick quickly took care of advising me not to improvise in case of ignoring the answer to any difficult question on the part of the examiners, Brian approached me with a big smile, adjusted the knot of my tie and only spoke about my elegance "I'm very glad you could afford a new suit". Despite my nervousness, it was impossible not to laugh at such an occurrence, and thus, openly laughing, I entered the Gavin de Beer Room, where Professors James Mallet and Sir Ghillean Prance were waiting at a round table to pepper me for two hours with questions. Brian was a Master for inspiring confidence.

I think I was Brian Gardiner's last doctoral student, although he never told me so. He retired in 1998, the same year I finished my PhD. I have returned to England several times, mainly to continue research or to attend academic commitments. Each time I tried at least to greet Brian on the phone. In October 2010, I took a train to Leatherhead, Surrey, from Victoria Station in London. Brian and his wife Liz picked me up at the local station and drove me home, just in time for tea and cookies. We talked about everything a bit for a couple of hours and we remembered past events (lamprey rubberiness included). I mentioned a few unknown historical connections between the heroes of the Venezuelan war of independence and some British travelers and naturalists. Brian thought it was worth writing an arti-

cle on that subject and invited me to do so for *The Linnean*, of which he was still the editor. I said goodbye gratefully that afternoon, promising to better investigate the details of my impossible stories and try to write something worth publishing. Unfortunately, four years followed in which I diverted my attention to other projects, and it was only during my recent sabbatical in Cambridge that I was able to compile enough data and put those ideas in order. The stories, however, remain unpublished.

One year after my visit to Leatherhead, the opportunity to return to Britain suddenly arose. As a member of an investigation team that conducted the exhumation of the remains of Simón Bolívar in Caracas, the forensic studies to determine his identity and to investigate with modern techniques the possible causes of his death, I was commissioned by the Venezuelan Government to deliver some small samples of bones of the Liberator of South America, to a fellow British researcher, who undertook a series of important molecular analyses at the University of Surrey. This mission of moral obligation was part of a legal procedure that involved formal administrative paperwork so as not to break the chain of custody of the biological material, and required the presence of witnesses. We chose to deliver those samples at the headquarters of the Venezuelan consulate, very close to the University College, setting a precise time in the afternoon, the same day as my arrival (it would have been a honor to sleep in a hotel with the remains of Simón Bolívar, but it was too a big responsibility). I flew from Caracas to Frankfurt, and there I boarded another plane to London, which was delayed. As I was under time pressure I surely looked nervous at the airport. Then, I drew the attention of customs officials, who detained and questioned me. Searching my hand luggage, they asked about the biological samples that came double packed in forensic bags from the Venezuelan scientific police, with colorful red plastic seals. After providing my explanations and presenting the government letters that accredited me, I was granted the exit from the airport. It was maybe ten minutes, but so agonizing that it felt like an eternity. It was so late that there was no point trying to cross the long road between Heathrow and North London by taxi, so my wisest decision was to take the Underground to Warren Street, miraculously arriving at the right place on time. In fact, the meeting with our collaborator and the consular officers seemed synchronized. Finally, two hours later I found myself relieved of that supreme responsibility.

I had to return to Venezuela in less than 48 hours. The next day I called Brian to say hello. He asked me what I was doing this time in London, to which I responded trying to match his good sense of humor "touring with Simón Bolívar on the tube. Quite a privilege. The last time he was seen in

London was in 1810”. Then I narrated the incident of the previous day in every detail. It was no fun, but actually very stressful. However, Brian –still a bit incredulous– found it so hilarious that he immediately exploded into uproarious laughter. “Angel, you should have gone to the museum and asked for Richard Owen! I hope those bones are genuine, I’m sure they are more important than that Piltdown crap!” That was the last time I heard Brian Gardiner’s knowing voice, unmistakable accent, and witty banter.

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