

# Rosemary Helen Lowe-McConnell (1921–2014), Honorary Foreign Member in Ichthyology

Lynne R. Parenti<sup>1</sup> and Melanie L. J. Stiassny<sup>2</sup>

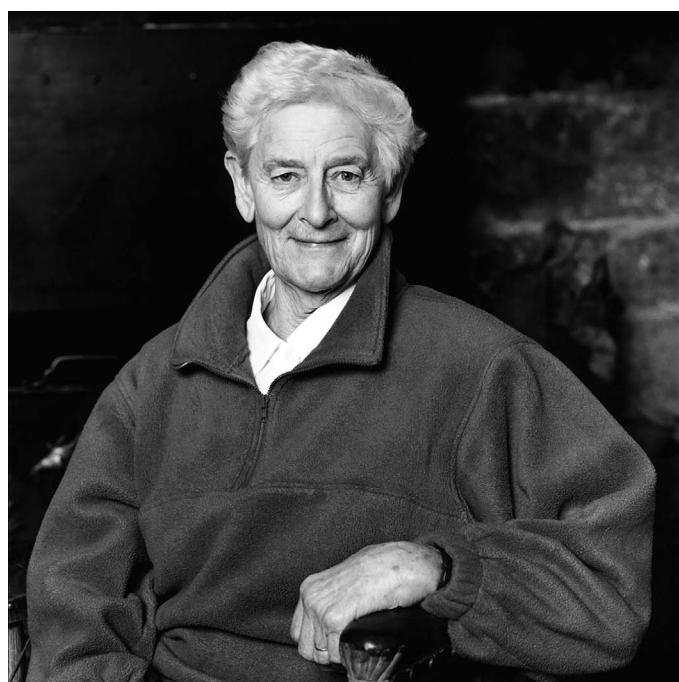
**D**ISTINGUISHED, revered, and well-loved fish ecologist ROSEMARY HELEN LOWE-MCCONNELL (Fig. 1) died in Ditchling, England on 22 December 2014, at the age of 93. The response worldwide to her death was swift and heartfelt: obituaries in major London newspapers, *The Guardian* (Greenwood, 2015), *The Telegraph* (Anonymous, 2015a), and *The Times* (Anonymous, 2015b), recounted details of her long and rich life with overwhelming admiration and respect as did tributes by ichthyologist colleagues (Reid, 2015; Stiassny and Kaufman, 2015). She was remembered as generous and gregarious and engaged fully in the work and lives of students and professionals whose friendships she cultivated and whose careers she nurtured. The extraordinary life of Ro, as she was almost universally known, was chronicled in three articles by Bruton (1994a, 1994b, 1994c), including a bibliography and an interview, and a celebration of her life was held at the Linnean Society of London in July 2015. There her generosity was confirmed, if it was ever in doubt, with the announcement that Ro had bequeathed some £1 million to various biological societies.

Ro's research on tropical fishes took her to Africa, which she visited for the first time in 1945, at the age of 24, and South and Central America. She was independent and fearless in the field, with focused study of the fisheries of Lake Nyasa (now Malawi) and pioneering work in many other African lakes, fishes of Bechuanaland (now Botswana) and Uganda, and later, inshore marine fishes in British Guiana (now Guyana), freshwater fishes in Mato Grosso, Brazil, and cichlids in Panama. She had a keen eye and could synthesize vast amounts of information on fishes and their interactions, with each other and with their habitats, and also interpret how those data could be applied to fisheries. She received her B.Sc. from the University of Liverpool (the city where she was born on 24 June 1921), and then worked for three years, 1942–1945, at the Freshwater Biological Association on the shores of Lake Windermere in England's bucolic Lake District. She was awarded M.Sc. and D.Sc. degrees also from Liverpool based on her outstanding research on the African tilapiine fishes. Her three books on the ecology of tropical fishes became standards in the field (Lowe-McConnell, 1975, 1977, 1987). The last, *Ecological Studies in Tropical Fish Communities*, has been cited over 1,000 times, as tabulated by Google Scholar, and was translated into Portuguese, an edition (Lowe-McConnell, 1999) that has been cited over 800 times. Already in 1994 ichthyologist Mike Bruton summed up her scientific legacy: "...rarely is a paper on tropical freshwater fishes published without citing her work." (1994a:79–80). And we are both forever grateful that we had the privilege to spend time with Ro and her (and

our) legendary mentor, Ethelwynn Trewavas, at the Natural History Museum in London in the early 1980s (Fig. 2).

Ro developed enduring relationships with colleagues worldwide and was a natural organizer of meetings and symposia on the developing field of tropical biology. She initiated a joint British Ecological Society/Linnean Society of London conference on "Speciation in Tropical Environments" and edited the proceedings (Lowe-McConnell, 1969). She was sought after to speak at scientific meetings and readily accepted invitations, such as to present her research at a workshop on "Community Structure and Function in Temperate and Tropical Streams" held at the Flathead Lake Biological Station, University of Montana, in April 1987. She co-authored a paper published as part of the conference proceedings (Benke et al., 1988).

In 1993 she was invited to speak at a symposium on great lakes of the world held at the University of Guelph. She then traveled to Austin, Texas, to attend the annual meetings of the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists held at the University of Texas, 27 May through 2 June. Here students and faculty who had learned much of their fish ecology from her writings surrounded her. A Society symposium on "Fish Ecology in Latin America" including



**Fig. 1.** Rosemary Lowe-McConnell, 1994. Photo by family friend and well-known English photographer, Nicholas Sinclair.

<sup>1</sup> Division of Fishes, NHB MRC 159, P.O. Box 37012, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20013-7012; Email: parentil@si.edu.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Ichthyology, American Museum of Natural History, Central Park West and 79<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, New York 10024; Email: mljs@amnh.org.

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**Fig. 2.** In the Fish Section in the old Spirit Building of the British Museum (Natural History), January 1982. Front row, left to right, kneeling, Melanie Stiassny and Ro McConnell. Back row, left to right, seated, Lynne Parenti and Ethelwynn Trewavas. Photo by M. L. J. Stiassny.

65 presented papers was a highlight of the meetings. Ro was a stalwart at the symposium where she also chaired a session.

Also at the 1993 Austin meetings, Ro participated as the senior woman ichthyologist at the "Women in Biology" luncheon held on Sunday, 30 May. These gatherings of women attending the meetings started in 1992 in response to a slide projected in one of the regular sessions that was stunningly demeaning to women. Women continued these annual gatherings at the Society's meetings for another decade or so, and ASIH formed an Equal Participation Committee and a mentoring program. Ro was gracious, as always, and entertained the student and professional women present with stories of her life and invited the same in return. Ro had faced many injustices, not the least of which was in 1953 when she married geologist Robert McConnell and was forced to resign her paid position due to the scientific civil service "Marriage Bar." She never held another paying job, but rather than object to this unfair treatment, she let her accomplishments demonstrate her extraordinary standing in the scientific community. She conveyed to the women assembled her sense of justice and her sheer force of will. Since a child, she wanted to go to Africa and be an explorer; despite the inevitable backlash that desire wrought, she went and she explored.

The following year Ro was one of six ichthyologists nominated to fill three vacancies in the category of Honorary Foreign Member in Ichthyology in the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists. The Board of Governors at

the annual society meetings in Los Angeles in 1994 elected Ro along with Gerry Allen, Australia, and Teruyo Uyeno, Japan. Her association with ASIH continued largely through her interactions with the many colleagues with whom she maintained close personal ties and collaborations. She published just one paper in *Copeia* describing, with Stewart Springer, a new species of dogshark from South America (Springer and Lowe, 1963).

Ro received numerous other honors during her lifetime, including the Beverton Medal in 2000 from the Fisheries Society of the British Isles (FSBI), awarded to "a distinguished scientist for a lifelong contribution to all aspects of the study of fish biology and/or fisheries science, with a focus on ground-breaking research" (FSBI Summer 2015 newsletter). Ro was a 'rock star' of fish ecology, but you would never have guessed so in her company. She was guileless and self-effacing. Her memoir is full of wit and optimism and a genuine love for the people and places and the fishes she has known (Lowe-McConnell, 2006). She always looked forward, and she referred to the many students she met as "our future." She signed her letters as she viewed her life: "Happy days."

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