

Obituary: Eileen Ann Harris (1949–2021)

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Eileen Harris (née Mitchell) passed away suddenly in June only a few days after retirement. She was a Curator of Parasitic Worms at the Natural History Museum, London, for more than 50 years and the Editorial Assistant of *Systematic Parasitology* for more than 25. Eileen was well known to helminth

systematists who borrowed material or needed information from the Museum and to a wide range of scientists and veterinarians who used her expertise on nematode identification.

During her youth in Morden, South London, where her father ran a delicatessen, she developed a love of animals and had many pets, usually cats (plural) and guinea pigs, throughout her life. At school she did well in her Advanced Biology examinations but did not have success in the breadth of subjects which would make a university education an option. At the age of 18, she applied to the Natural History Museum [then the British Museum (Natural History)] and was accepted for the position of Assistant Scientific Officer. So, in 1967, she joined the staff of the Nematode Section in the Department of Zoology to work under W. Grant Inglis (<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00010877>), who shortly after left the Museum to become the director of the South Australian Museum in Adelaide. The Nematode Section was then amalgamated with the Flatworm Section to form the Parasitic Worms Section under Stephen Prudhoe OBE (<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00010875>). During her long stay with this Section (later Division), she was promoted through several grades, ending up as a Senior Curator, and saw numerous changes in job title, group title, department title and management. I first encountered Eileen in 1971 when I joined the museum

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and was her line manager from 1975 until 2005. Rod Bray was a colleague of Eileen's in 'Parasitic Worms' during these years, and, whereas Rod concentrated on the parasitic flatworms, Eileen worked with the nematodes, a group with which she developed a considerable expertise.

During the 1970s and 80s, the identification of parasitic nematodes sent into the Museum by veterinarians and scientists from all over the world enabled Eileen to build up an enormous breadth of knowledge and develop an impressive memory for scientific names (both parasites and hosts). Her ability to remember which nematodes occur in which hosts, and their diagnostic characteristics, enabled quick identifications – 'I've seen this somewhere before – Ah! I remember' was a common quote. As her expertise developed, Eileen published a small number of papers on her own, including the description of a new genus of nematode, *Teporingonema* Harris, 1985, from a Mexican volcano rabbit. However, realising that her inability as an artist was a problem, she later tended to work on joint papers with veterinarians and scientists whose material she had identified. Nevertheless, she did end up with c. 40 publications, including some with notable nematode systematists, such as W. Grant Inglis, with whom she erected the family Kiwinematidae for material from kiwis, and František Moravec (<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00009688>). These papers were on nematodes from a wide variety of hosts, mammals, birds, reptiles and fish, particularly from the British fauna, but of particular interest to her were those from marine mammals and, above all, stranded cetaceans.

She was one of the compilers of the Museum's Host-Parasite Database for 35 years, the later digital parts of which are still widely accessed on-line. A derivative of this was her published checklist of the helminth parasites of marsupials and monotremes in 1983. After data-entry to this database ended in 2003, she became involved in making details of the Museum's helminth collection available on-line. Other aspects of her work included various public

engagements, giving talks and presenting 'parasitic worms' to visiting students; she appeared several times on TV documentaries and chat-shows. This was a feature of her work which she really enjoyed and was very good at.

During my tenure as Editor of *Systematic Parasitology* (1986–2012), Eileen acted as the Editorial Assistant. In addition to the usual administrative duties, few will be aware that she checked the references of all papers published in the journal during this period and read all of the proofs! She had a very good eye for spotting errors.

Eileen's life was the Museum – she knew everyone, always knew whom to contact to get things done and usually arranged it for you. Having a long commute (more than 60 km each way on public transport), Eileen did not always arrive at the Museum early. Her first 'duty' in a morning was to ring around to several contacts and access and deliver any new gossip. Always immaculately attired and perfumed herself, one might have expected that her room was similarly pristine – sadly, this was not the case – it was always in considerable disorder, with barely room for a keyboard on the desk! Similarly, her time-management was not exactly exemplary and her work could be somewhat disorganised; but, strangely, Eileen was so integrated into and part of Museum life that her peccadilloes caused more amusement than annoyance.

Eileen's passing, only a few days after she took retirement, was a big shock to all who knew her. She had been looking forward to returning to the Museum as a Scientific Associate to work on the parasitic nematodes of the much neglected British fauna. Eileen was a great asset to the Museum and her cheerful helpfulness and generosity were widely appreciated by friends, colleagues, visitors and students alike. She will be sorely missed by all.

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