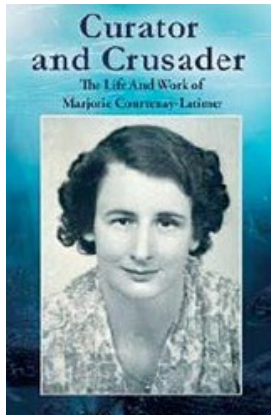




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Curator and crusader: The life and work of Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer



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The extraordinary life of a pioneering museum curator

Most people with an interest in nature have surely heard of Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer in connection with the discovery of the first living coelacanth known to science. Her efforts put East London and its new museum on the world map. I joined the staff of the museum in 1988, so I knew 'Marge' during her 80s and 90s when she often visited the museum to be filmed about the coelacanth or to attend museum functions. Reading *Curator and Crusader*, I enjoyed learning so much more about this remarkable woman and what she achieved during her 42 years as curator and subsequent years of active retirement. Mike Bruton remembers Marge from his school days and gives her credit for the positive impact she had on his career. He realised that she 'lived a story worth telling' and did an excellent job piecing together this highly recommended biography from diverse sources of information, greatly assisted by Nancy Tietz, ex-director of the East London Museum (ELM). He used transcripts of Marge's father's diaries, an unpublished manuscript on the history of her family, Marge's illustrated scrapbooks, copious autobiographical notes and minutes of meetings, letters, speeches, newspaper clippings and field notes in the ELM archives. Extracts are often reproduced verbatim – a style I found informative, and which allows readers to make up their own minds about the content. There are ample illustrations: black and white photos, sketches and 16 pages of colour photos. The six appendices include the full citation for the award of her honorary doctorate and titles of a selection of her newspaper articles.

Among my favourite chapters are the two on her childhood, giving insights into how her keen interest in the world around her developed, encouraged by her mother. At the age of nine she was collecting and sending specimens to the museum in King Williams Town! Her father changed jobs or was transferred every year or so to remote railway stations or villages all over the Eastern Cape and Free State Provinces. A map of the whole country shows where these places are, although I would have preferred a larger map of only the relevant regions, and to see the location of the family farms – important places for the cultivation of Marge's interests. Her formal education was very rudimentary, but on the positive side she enjoyed opportunities to explore the natural world in many different environments. Although Marge excelled in many subjects, as one of six daughters, there were no finances for tertiary education. Surprisingly for someone so full of vitality and who lived to 97, Marge was a weak and sickly child, but she did survive the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918.

Not only was Marge disadvantaged in terms of education, she was also no stranger to other hardships such as the desperate food shortages of World War 1. She was appointed first curator of the East London Museum in 1931, a period when there were few women in leading roles. She must have experienced some tough times with the Museum Board and professional scientists given that she was a woman, young and lacked formal education. She was even ridiculed by some for suggesting that the coelacanth specimen was significant and worth saving for science. Her success is an inspiration, and shows how doors do open for those with passion and enthusiasm, who dream big and work hard.

Marge had very wide knowledge, and although she was not an academic, Bruton draws attention to her scientific research in ornithology and botany; the extensive reference list includes all her scientific articles. She communicated with a large number of leading scientists across a range of disciplines and sought the advice of experts regularly; extracts of these communications are enlightening. Evidence is presented that she was held in high regard by the majority of scientists and by her staff, although the few who did not respect her work are mentioned. The coelacanth was named *Latimeria* by JLB Smith as a tribute and he dedicated his bestselling *Old Fourlegs* to Marge. There is a chapter on her crusades for environmental conservation, and her contributions were praised by the Director of Nature Conservation, Douglas Hey. A chapter is devoted to bird-ringing as Marge used bird rings in her research 12 years before the official start of the practice in South Africa, something which is not acknowledged elsewhere.

No one can dispute that Marge excelled in her mandate and there are several chapters on how she built the ELM into a thriving hub of community activity assisted at every turn by the Chairman of the Board, GG Smith. Detail on buildings, finances and staffing are buffered by lighter elements like their annual collecting trips to remote wildernesses and pet dogs. Early in her career she was sent for training at the Durban and Cape Town museums and started forming relationships with museologists; she was a founder member of the South African Museums' Association. The very large dioramas Marge created were the first to make full use of this technique in South Africa and still delight visitors today. She was passionate about educating the public and mounted an extraordinary number of temporary exhibitions, held talks and guided tours, and was instrumental in founding the local culture- and nature-based societies. She was a prolific writer of short articles, including in a regular column in the local press. Marge loved children and always welcomed them to show her their finds. In short, her museum was her life.

Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer the woman is portrayed in the final four chapters. Personal traits and circumstances, heart-wrenching and humorous, are captured in lengthy extracts from interviews with people who had worked with her or known her well. She described her life as a happy one. I remember well her sense of humour and her giggling when telling a funny story. One of my few disappointments in the book is the lack of more anecdotes by current or recently retired staff of the ELM. She was described, not as a feminist, but as very feminine, and she always wore blouses, skirts and stockings even in the field!