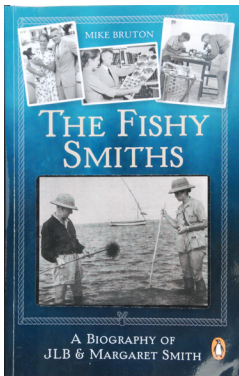




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A tale of unusual dedication: The lives of JLB and Margaret Smith

Southern Africa is home to almost 10% of the world's marine fishes, drawn from three major biogeographic zones (Indo-Pacific, Atlantic and Antarctic). Our modern understanding of this remarkable diversity is due in no small part to the dedication and hard work of James Leonard Brierley (JLB) Smith, and his wife Margaret Smith, whose lives were dedicated to laying the foundation of ichthyology in South Africa. JLB Smith began his career in science as a chemistry lecturer. He was married for 14 years to his first wife Henrietta (née Pienaar) with whom he had three children. Following their divorce, he married one of his chemistry students, Mary Margaret Macdonald; together they forged remarkable careers in ichthyology.

In *The Fishy Smiths*, Mike Bruton documents the lives of these two extraordinary scientists. The Smiths led fascinating lives and lived at a time when the biological world around them was largely unexplored. Three themes in particular provide a framework around which this book is structured. The first is the discovery of a living coelacanth in 1939, and the 13-year quest that led to the discovery of a second specimen in 1952. These discoveries were of immense scientific importance, and they changed the course of ichthyology in South Africa. The second was the publication in 1949 of *The Sea Fishes of Southern Africa*, which provided scientists and the South African public with a comprehensive account of the fish fauna of the region. The third was the publication of a popular account of the story of the coelacanth, entitled *Old Fourlegs*, which Mike Bruton has called (arguably quite correctly) 'the best fish book in the world'.

The Coelacanth saga (Smith apparently always used a capital C when referring to this fish) is well known, as many books have covered the story of its discovery. The salient points are covered again, in some detail, in *The Fishy Smiths*. They include the dramatic discovery of the first specimen by the young curator of the East London Museum (Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer); the long search that led to the discovery of a second specimen in the Comores; and the daring dash in a South African Air Force Dakota (later dubbed 'the flying fishcart') to retrieve it. JLB Smith was the sole author of the subsequent publication of the discovery in *Nature*, and, remarkably, the paper contained not a single reference to any other work in the field. In fact, the only person that JLB included as a co-author in any of his 213 ichthyological publications was his wife Margaret. He was a loner.

The publication of Austin Roberts' now famous book *The Birds of South Africa* led to the idea of a similar book on sea fishes. *The Sea Fishes of Southern Africa* turned out to be an enormous undertaking. Many fish-collecting expeditions had to be undertaken to the remote coasts of eastern Africa, where transport, food and water could only be obtained with difficulty, and conditions were downright dangerous. The Smiths faced marauding man-eating lions, venomous snakes, venomous and poisonous fish, sharks, strong currents and rough seas, and exposure to a host of diseases including bilharzia, hookworm, typhus, malaria, blackwater fever and fungoid infections. They spent all their waking hours collecting, preserving and cataloguing fish specimens for later description and illustration. They used any and all means available to collect fish, including dynamiting the reefs. On a trip to Aldabra, for example, they collected 10 000 fish specimens in just 3 days using explosives, something akin to mass slaughter that would be unthinkable today. The book had to be adequately illustrated, and the brunt of this work fell to Margaret. The first edition of *The Sea Fishes* contains over 900 colour illustrations of fish species, 685 of them by Margaret Smith. Each painting took between 8 and 60 hours to complete to the required standard. It is estimated that 30 000 hours of work by several people were crowded into 3.5 years to produce this book. *The Sea Fishes* was an instant success, regarded by many as the best illustrated natural history book yet published anywhere in the world.

Old Fourlegs is JLB Smith's personal account of the discovery of the Coelacanth, written for a broad audience. He was persuaded to write it by his wife following an incident in which he nearly drowned – she was of the opinion that only he could tell the story properly, and that he had better do it soon. We are told that 'he wrote the book, in longhand with a pencil and notebook, in three 10-day spells while floating on the Knysna Lagoon in his boat, accompanied by his dog, Marlin; these were apparently the only circumstances that allowed him to write undisturbed'. The detail in the book is testimony to his powers of recall. It rapidly became an international bestseller, and put South African science on the map to the same extent as when Chris Barnard performed the world's first heart transplant.

JLB Smith was a complex character, viewed by people either as very kind and helpful, or as rude and self-centred. Apparently, if you demonstrated an interest and worked hard, you would fall into the first category, but this was a man with an incredible work ethic, who did not suffer fools gladly, and who would ignore you if you did not live up to his high expectations. He was something of an introvert, but at the same time an excellent teacher and communicator. Because he was both a serious scientist and an avid angler, he was able to write for a broader public, adding to the appeal of his books. He suffered from poor health all of his adult life, as a result of having contracted tropical diseases while in the military. When he married Margaret in 1938, his doctors did not expect him to live longer than another 5 years, yet, by adopting an austere lifestyle that included regular rigorous exercise and a frugal diet, he lived for another 30 years. Not wanting to become a burden to people, he took his own life shortly after his 70th birthday.

Margaret Smith provided an immense amount of support for JLB throughout their 30-year marriage. She helped him with tasks for which he did not always have the strength, followed his austere lifestyle, protected him from disturbance by many people who sought his advice, and accompanied him on all of his collecting expeditions. She cut her hair short and wore it in a unassuming bun, dressed simply, and wore no makeup. JLB named



several fish species after his wife, and in one description he noted: 'This exceptionally beautiful creature is named as a small tribute to my wife, whose contribution to all phases of our work is probably greater than my own'. Following JLB's death, Margaret underwent a metamorphosis, abandoning much of the sombre lifestyle she had followed up to then, and becoming much more outgoing. She also set about cementing her late husband's legacy, establishing the JLB Smith Institute of Ichthyology and becoming its first director (despite having no formal qualification in the field).

The Fishy Smiths is a highly informative book, packed with detail about the lives of two South Africans who left an enviable legacy in

science. It covers the lives of others, too, with chapters on Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer, and JLB and Margaret's son William Smith, who was also an outstanding teacher. For those bibliophiles with an interest in books on natural history, *The Fishy Smiths* also contains a wealth of information about, and illustrations of, the books published by the Smiths, those written by other authors from the JLB Smith Institute, and those written about the Coelacanth. This book is about a unique couple whose talents and shortfalls complemented each other perfectly. They formed a formidable and inspiring partnership that changed the course of ichthyology in Africa and beyond. *The Fishy Smiths* is highly recommended reading for scientists, naturalists, anglers and historians.