

J. Z. Young (1907–1997)

An obituary

John Zachary Young, better known simply as J.Z. (pronounced 'jay zed') among zoologists the world over, died at the age of 90 on 4 July 1997. So profound has been his influence on an entire generation of biologists that he will always remain a major figure in the disciplines of zoology and neurophysiology. Any one who has followed an undergraduate course in zoology will remember J.Z. as the brilliant British zoologist who wrote the standard textbook entitled *The Life of Vertebrates*, first published in 1950. It introduced us to the study of the origin and evolution of the vertebrates or animals with backbones. J.Z. believed that the essential of any good textbook is that it should be both accurate and general. *The Life of Vertebrates* is perhaps the best textbook of vertebrate zoology ever written. The scholarly work provides a combined account of the embryology, anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, palaeontology, and ecology of the vertebrates. Almost five decades after it was written, the book continues to remain one of the most easily and enjoyably readable textbooks. J.Z. is also remembered for two other books that he published: *The Life of*

Mammals (1957), and *Introduction to the Study of Man* (1971).

J.Z. was born in Bristol in April, 1907 and was educated at Marlborough College, Oxford, where he became a Fellow of Magdalen College. In 1945, he was appointed to the Chair of Anatomy at the University College London. Although he was an excellent teacher at the University and became very famous for his textbooks on vertebrates, his outstanding scientific contributions came from his long-term research studies on invertebrates such as the cephalopods—a class of molluscs such as squid, cuttlefish, octopus, and nautilus of exclusively marine distribution. His research and publications spanned almost seven decades. His first publication in 1929 was on the organ that he discovered in the stellate ganglion of the octopus. His subsequent research on octopus led to an understanding of learning in such a complex and highly organized marine mollusc. The discovery by J.Z. of the giant nerve fibres of squids in the 1930s paved the way to an understanding on how information is transmitted by nerves. J.Z. loved the many years that he spent in Naples, and was taken up by the Neapolitan charm. Italy

recognized his long association with Naples and made him an Honorary Citizen of Naples in 1991.

Despite his outstanding contributions to the study of the neurophysiology of the squid, the 1963 Nobel Prize was awarded to Alan Hodgkin and Andrew Huxley for their work on the squid giant fibre. This was rather unfortunate and many scientists felt that J.Z. ought to have been included in the award. Nevertheless, J.Z. will always be remembered as the man who paved the way for modern studies in neurobiology. He was a gentleman and scholar who generously gave to others his time and inspiration—perhaps the most valuable gifts any academic could offer to his students and colleagues. Those of us—and there are many—who were privileged to have studied his books and read his papers, will never forget him as one of the most influential zoologists.

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