

EDITORIAL

Special issue on entomology: A tribute to Prof. Simon R. Leather

Prof. Simon R. Leather (Figure 1), BSc MBiol Hon.FRES PhD, was an Emeritus Professor at Harper Adams University when he passed away in 2021. Tributes have been paid to him soon after; he was a leading figure in the entomological and scientific community. As published on the web page of Harper Adams University, UK, on 29 September 2021, Simon described himself: "I am an applied entomologist, but by that I don't mean someone who can identify a huge number of species. I am not a taxonomist. Rather, I am a competent field entomologist who can recognise most insects to Order, some Orders to Family and within some families I am able to recognise individual species, especially if they are of economic importance.". Simon was a lot more than that.

Over the years working with Simon and based on the information exchanged with people who knew him well when preparing this special issue, Simon was extremely dedicated to everything he did, a kind bright man ready to help. He was on the board of *Annals of Applied Biology* since 2005 as a Senior Editor and from 2015 until 2020 as the Editor-in-Chief, and stayed with *Annals* in 2021 as Senior Editor. We can all say that working with him was easy, he was ready to take action on anything and to provide the needed support the editors might needed.

Three years have passed since Simon left us and this issue of *Annals* is a tribute to him. We decided to publish only papers in the field of Entomology and in this special issue Editorial we share with you some thoughts on Simon's work and life.

Also, not to be missed, is the timely accompanying "Opinion" article "Don't Forget the Blogosphere" by Heinen et al. (2024), in a 'blog style' article piece, which also contains a bit more on Simon. We are pretty sure you are going to love it.

1 | SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Simon Robert Leather was born on 13 March 1955, got his B.Sc. (I) Agricultural Zoology, Leeds University, and then his Ph.D. in Ecology of Cereal Aphids, University of East Anglia, 1980. He took the following Academic & Professional Posts since graduation:

- January 1981–December 1981, Royal Society PDRA, Agricultural Research Centre, Viikki, Finland.
- January 1982–August 1982, AFRC PDRA, University of East Anglia.

- September 1982–August 1992, Entomologist, Forestry Commission, Northern Research Station.
- September 1992–September 2012, Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Reader in Applied Ecology, Imperial College, London.
- September 2012: Professor of Entomology, Harper Adams University.

As you will read below, and in the Heinen et al. (2024) accompanying article, Simon was passionate about science and entomology. He published over 200 articles plus several books, book chapters and was very active on social media sharing his experience, ideas, and thoughts with his followers, colleagues, friends and general audience, a contribution that we all are grateful. He kept a very active personal blog: "Don't Forget the Roundabouts" (<https://simonleather.wordpress.com/>).

Simon, we miss you! Thank you!

Ricardo A. Azevedo: I met Simon in person for the first time in 2008, at Rothamsted Research, when we had a Senior Editor's (SE) meeting (Figure 2), which was my very first one. I did not speak much, and spending the day with those guys was tremendous, and I easily came to admire them. Simon was a gentleman talking to me for quite a long time. I think it was his second SE's meeting. Working with Simon was easy and two things I liked a lot about him were that he was quick to reply to any messages and to solve problems. Over the years all the SEs left the board, new ones joined, and Simon and I were the two who remained from that first group that worked so well together for some 12 years. Then, Simon took the role of Editor-in-Chief (EiC) and what a great time we had. Very efficient, sharp and always positive, and keeping the relationship with the editors good but making sure we were all committed to the journal. During his last year as EiC I worked closely with him because I was going to take his place in the following year, and what a year it was! I learnt so much and Simon was once again a mentor to me. Despite my involvement with *Annals* since 2006, it was during those 7 months working closely to Simon that I truly realised the huge and demanding work of a EiC. I always made sure that I would arrive at the SE's meeting at least 1–2 h earlier because I knew Simon would be there and we would be able to talk about other things, not science or the journal. Whereas Simon was very active on social media, I was not, but he was the one who insisted that I should get involved because it would be good for the journal and for my own research. He was the very first one to follow me on Twitter! I also remember that Simon, Carol Millman (AAB),



FIGURE 1 Prof. Simon R. Leather with giant aphid (This figure has also been used by Azevedo & Millman, 2020, DOI: [10.1111/aab.12645](https://doi.org/10.1111/aab.12645)).



FIGURE 3 Simon's office at Harper Adams. Twice a year, once just before Christmas and the other just before he went on his summer holiday, he would develop the urge to have a tidy! (from: <https://simonleather.wordpress.com/2013/07/12/tidydeskaphobia-does-your-desk-reflect-how-your-brain-works/>).



FIGURE 2 *Annals of Applied Biology* 2008 Senior Editor's meeting at Rothamsted Research, Harpenden, U.K. From left to right: Simon Leather, Carol Millman, Jari Valkonen, Martin Parry, Jim McNicol, Peter Lea and Ricardo Azevedo.

Andreas Pedersen (Wiley) and I had an *Annals*-Wiley quarterly catch-up meeting on 23 of September 2021; Simon took part in it and shared his comments as usual; he was clearly very tired, but he was there fully involved and dedicated to *Annals*. He passed away a few days later. What else can I say? In 2020, I proposed a new section called: “Editorial – Interviews”, and the first person we interviewed was Simon (Azevedo & Millman, 2020). Please do read the article and you will get some more information about Simon in his own words. Simon, such a great and dear colleague.

Tom W. Pope: I first met Simon when I applied to study for the M.Sc. in Applied Entomology at Imperial College London back in 1998. I still recall my first introduction to a Simon Leather office, full of the many and varied tasks (some would say clutter) he seemed to always have on the go at any one time (Figure 3). He always assured me that he was actually very organised, as his 11,000 book library and extensive reprint collection would seem to support. The other thing I

recall was how friendly and welcoming Simon was, as a nervous prospective student, I quickly felt relaxed and able to talk about the course I had applied to study and my interests in entomology. I feel fortunate that I was able to keep this conversation with Simon going for the next 23 years. This conversation continued through my M.Sc. and then on to my Ph.D., where Simon was part of my advisory team, a post-doctoral role where Simon became a collaborator, and finally as a colleague when we both moved to Harper Adams in 2012. The 10 years working together with Simon at Harper Adams was a great experience, establishing the M.Sc. courses, the Jean Jackson Entomology Laboratory and associated research activities at the university. In all this, Simon provided unwavering support and encouragement whilst leaving the space for me to find my own way. I recognise how fortunate I was to meet Simon back in 1998 and the impact he had on my career but also that I am one of many who can say this. Simon was a brilliant entomologist whose academic achievements speak for themselves, but just as important are the positive impacts that he had on students, colleagues and anyone else who met him in person or online throughout his career.

Andrew Wilcox: I first met Simon in 1992 when we both applied for an environment lecturer job at Harper Adams Agricultural College as it was known at the time. At the interviews, Simon was dressed in exactly the same manner as he always did, wearing blue jeans, a shirt and brown suede desert boots. I remember questioning if I was somewhat overdressed in my best suit as we had a glass of sherry in the Principal's office! I think we were both surprised at how interviews were conducted at Harper Adams in 1992. As it happens, neither Simon or I were offered the job—obviously desert boots and business suits did not cut it in a land of tweed! Simon then went off to undertake his seminal role as a lecturer at Imperial College at Silwood Park and I was offered the job at Harper Adams after the originally appointed candidate subsequently dropped out. Although I was

generally aware of Simon's progress at Silwood Park, we never actually met again (despite me being a Silwood old boy) until 10 January 2012. This was the meeting where everything changed and the intention to move the successful Entomology M.Sc. courses from Imperial College to Harper Adams University was agreed. I was managing the taught postgraduate provision at the time and the job fell to me to compile the not insubstantial validation paperwork. Simon of course offered me his full support, but as we are all aware, university administration was not one of Simon's favourite activities. I recall asking Simon many complex questions during this period and receiving one or two word emails in response such as "okay" or "sounds good". We did, however, get the programmes successfully validated and welcomed our first M.Sc. Entomology cohort to Harper Adams in September 2012. By this time, I had been appointed Head of Department and I was able to resource the courses more effectively. The courses were very popular in their new home and the entomology section at Harper Adams has since continued to evolve, expand and thrive. Simon's unwavering dedication and drive are the key reasons why we have entomology at Harper Adams University and I am privileged to have worked with Simon (even though I did most of the paperwork) to create this proud legacy.

Joe M. Roberts: Simon and I first corresponded when I was an undergraduate student studying forensic biology during 2011. I had emailed him to enquire about career opportunities in forensic entomology after attending a lecture on the subject at the Natural History Museum in London. His (characteristically short) reply was that there were no jobs in forensic entomology but that I should apply for the postgraduate entomology course he ran as there were lots of other entomology jobs out there! I decided that this course wasn't really for me and pursued a more chemistry-based postgraduate course in the hopes of still becoming a forensic scientist. Fast forward 12 months. Simon had relocated to Harper Adams University and I had realised that forensic science wasn't for me. Luckily, Simon had just advertised four Ph.D. studentships and one of these caught my eye as it would allow me to combine my newly found interest of entomology with chemistry. I submitted my application and was lucky enough to be offered the position in Simon's newly established lab at Harper Adams University. I spent the following 4 years working with Simon during my Ph.D. mostly trying to keep him on task during meetings and stop him from emptying cups of coffee onto my laptop (this happened once). He was a fantastic supervisor who always had time to chat about my work and offer advice when I asked. I was very fortunate to have someone as experienced as Simon guide me through the complex Ph.D. world and he encouraged me to be an independent thinker, ultimately inspiring me to become an academic. I now manage the courses that Simon established at Harper Adams University and am grateful for the many years of work he put into developing them. Simon's legacy lives on through the many hundreds of students that he taught during his extensive career – entomology is a better discipline because of him! (Figure 4).

Carol A. Millman: I first met Simon in the 1990s, while he was working as a lecturer at Imperial College. He used to bring a bus load of students to our Entomology (afterwards named Biocontrol and



FIGURE 4 Photograph of Simon posing with the giant aphid at the RES Aphid SIG in 2019 held at Rothamsted Research.

IPM) group conferences. We got to know each other better when Simon became the Senior Editor for Entomology and Nematology papers submitted to *Annals*. We had a very tight knit group. At this time Martin Parry was the Editor-in-Chief, followed by Jari Valkonen. I was delighted when Jari retired from the Editorial Board in 2015, and Simon became the Editor-in-Chief. Simon was very calm and efficient. When Twitter took off, we called him the "Twitter King"; he could always be seen at our conferences busy tweeting at the back of the room and sending out details of every talk given during the day. Someone once said to me, he never even listens to the talks, he's always on his phone. How wrong you are, I replied, you should follow him on Twitter, then you will find out exactly what he is doing. He was a great advocate for both the journal and AAB, and cared very deeply about both. Even after he became ill, and during COVID, he still attended our virtual meetings, even as Ricardo mentioned, a few days before he passed away. Simon had a great impact on the Editorial Board and was always there for advice and assistance. The Senior Editors always worked very well together, and our annual meeting was a highlight of the year for all of us. I still think of him often, and he is sadly missed.

Matthew A. Back: Simon joined Harper Adams in 2012. Although my research interests were slightly different to his, I was fully aware of the importance of his work within the sphere of Entomology. We worked together on courses and several research bids. Simon was unassuming, relaxed and easy to talk to. He could speak naturally on many topics, drawing upon his own experiences and anecdotes to create interest. Working with Simon on a BBSRC STARS project, to

deliver a short course on crop protection to final year degree students, was a great pleasure and privilege. He went above and beyond to ensure that the students undertaking the course got the most out of their week; this included creating fun activities during evenings and at the weekend. Simon was extremely supportive to journals and learned societies, including the Association of Applied Biologists; he was the welcome steady hand, who knew exactly what he was doing. Finally, I cannot omit the time when Simon stayed back after work to show my daughter Emily (then 5 years old) our collections of moths and butterflies—she has never forgotten ‘Professor Leather and all those cabinets of insects’! I miss seeing him around Harper Adams, with his flamboyant insect themed t-shirts and blue denim jeans.

Gia – Guðbjörg I. Aradóttir: It is said that you will always remember how people made you feel over what they said or did. I first met Simon when he became my Ph.D. supervisor. I arrived at Imperial College's Silwood Park where he greeted me with his warm smile, making me feel very welcome and swept up in his enthusiasm for the day's activities. Through my Ph.D. and beyond he was a great colleague and mentor to me as so many others. He cared deeply about his students, their progress and wellbeing, and in one of our last conversations he told me how his advice to his students seeking employment was to look at where they would get good support and be valued and not just the academic ranking of an institution. In this as in so many areas he was ahead of the curve. Simon's scientific achievements stand for themselves and will continue to benefit generations to come, but for those of us that knew him the memory of a great man who was always engaged and engaging, his kindness, good humour and positivity will live on.

Martin A. J. Parry: I was delighted to recruit Simon to the editorial board of *Annals of Applied Biology*. He quickly proved himself an efficient and diligent editor who worked hard to ensure the success of the journal. I enjoyed working with him and I was pleased but not surprised when Simon later became a Senior Editor and eventually Editor in Chief.

Ricardo A. Azevedo 

Tom W. Pope 

Andrew Wilcox 

Joe M. Roberts  
Carol A. Millman  
Matthew A. Back  
Guðbjörg I. Aradóttir  
Martin A. J. Parry  

¹Departamento de Genética, Escola Superior de Agricultura “Luiz de Queiroz”/Universidade de São Paulo (ESALQ/USP), Piracicaba, Brazil

²Agriculture & Environment Department, Harper Adams University, Newport, UK

³Association of Applied Biologists, Warwick, UK

⁴Mamore Research and Innovation Limited, Harpenden, UK

⁵Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

Correspondence

Ricardo A. Azevedo, Departamento de Genética, Escola Superior de Agricultura “Luiz de Queiroz”/Universidade de São Paulo (ESALQ/USP), Piracicaba, Brasil.

Email: raa@usp.br

ORCID

Ricardo A. Azevedo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7316-125X>

Tom W. Pope  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3678-2943>

Andrew Wilcox  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8971-4787>

Joe M. Roberts  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9576-9239>

Carol A. Millman  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4938-7261>

Matthew A. Back  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4774-5491>

Guðbjörg I. Aradóttir  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6068-4123>

Martin A. J. Parry  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4477-672X>

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