



## In Memoriam - John Anthony Van Couvering (1931–2023)

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In early 1978, the American Museum of Natural History appointed Dr. John Van Couvering as Editor-in-Chief of Micropaleontology Press, a program that began as a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project in 1935 and had been housed at the Museum since 1942. For John, this was the beginning of a 38 year-commitment to the dissemination of knowledge on the microscopic shells of protists, through cataloguing and editing scientific journals. While John officially retired in 2016, he continued to volunteer his time and expertise until shortly before his passing on May 22, 2023. The road was not a smooth one, though. As the AMNH expanded its programs in paleontology and molecular biology, it claimed the space occupied by people who devoted themselves to collecting information on tiny skeletons that could not be readily displayed, first by moving the program to the basement, and then parting with it altogether. The *New Yorker* magazine took note of the move

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/01/12/here-today>. With great foresight, John established The Micropaleontology Project, Inc., a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation in the state of New York, becoming the Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of the Project. He rented space on Fifth Avenue until 2009, and later moved the Project to the campus of Queens College of the City University of New York.

John Anthony Van Couvering was born August 2, 1931 in Los Angeles. He proved early on to have had a keen eye for the Californian landscapes and the first hint of his future interest in Earth Sciences is a geology book that he wrote and beautifully illustrated when he was 9 years old! This interest was re-affirmed at Fullerton Junior College (1949–1952) where he double majored in Journalism and Geology. His career path was already traced. John would prove to be both, an exceptional sci-

entific writer and an inspired cartoonist and artist (see below). The Korean war interrupted his academic studies when, stationed at Pearl Harbor, he spent two years (1952–1953) serving in the US Navy. Back in Los Angeles, John attended the University of California where his Master's thesis (1960) under Cordell Durrell took him to the "Geology of Chilcoot 15' Quadrangle, northern Sierra Nevada". After a three-year break, he returned to UCLA (1963–1967) to undertake pre-doctoral research on "Cenozoic volcanic stratigraphy in northern Sierra Nevada and adjacent Great Basin". In the meantime, a meeting with Louis Leakey, supported and encouraged by his then wife Judith Harris Van Couvering, awoke a life-long passion for paleoanthropology. The Van Couverings took their small children and followed Leakey to Kenya. The team worked on early hominid fossil sites where important finds were made near Lake Victoria. This was an exciting time: "One afternoon I picked up a fossil jaw, much stepped on and broken, as I walked along a cowpath from doing some rock measuring. By gosh, it looked like a hominoid!" (Letter of June 28, 2006, to a friend). John had found an anthropoid primate which would be subsequently described as *Dryopithecus (Rangwapithecus) vancouveringi*<sup>1,2</sup>. The geology of Rusinga Island became the subject of John's Ph.D (1971) in Geology at Cambridge University, St John's College. Leakey, who had employed John, was now his supervisor. (For those of you readers familiar with coccolithophorids, it is interesting to note that his internal supervisor was Maurice Black, who among others, wrote pioneering papers on this group's phylogeny). Post-doctoral studies (1971–1972) on paleoenvironment in East African fossiliferous sediments and on the Neogene time scale followed at the University of California, Berkeley, supported by the Wenner–Gren Foundation.

John's academic education was productively complemented by a series of short appointments that broadened his expertise and helped him support his studies and his family. After working in Rusinga and completing his PhD, John and his family moved to Boulder, Colorado. Judith became an Assistant Professor at the University of Colorado and eventually Curator of Vertebrate Paleontology at the Boulder Museum of Natural History. There they raised their four charming children, Antony, Anne, David and Elizabeth. Among other appointments, John held positions of Associate Professor (Geology) at Los Angeles City College (1965–1967); Adjunct Professor, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado (1972–78); Research Associate GS-11, Isotope Geology Branch, US Geological Survey (1974–75); Environmental Impact Consultant, Boulder, Colorado (1975–77); and Editor of *Geology* (1976–77). Equipped with this broad scientific/academic background and seeking collaborations with his peers, John would develop major scientific concepts in his do-

<sup>1</sup>*Dryopithecus (Rangwapithecus) vancouveringi* Andrews 1974 was "named in honor of Judith and John Van Couvering who found the type specimen in 1968 at the Kaswanga Point deposits of Rusinga Island."

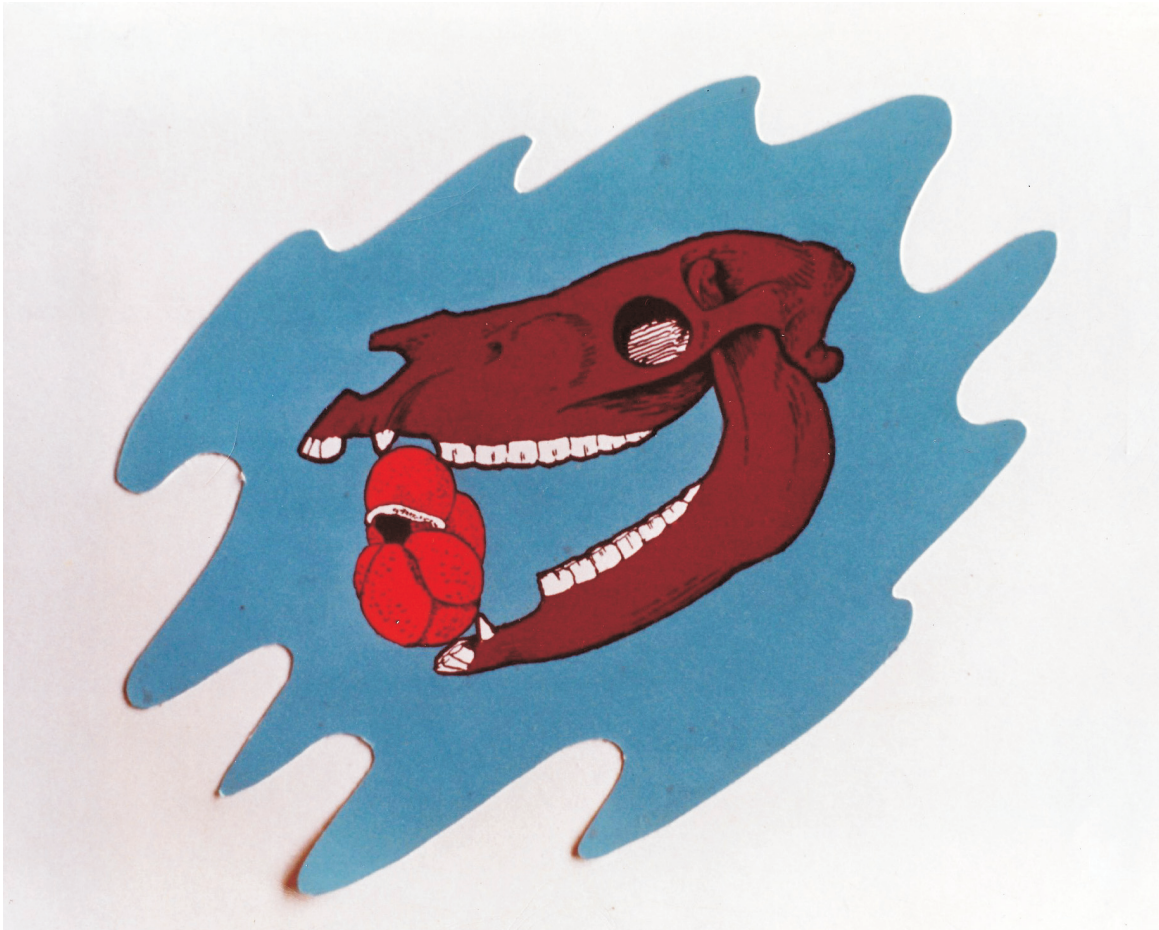
Renamed *Nyanzapithecus vancouveringorum* (Andrews 1974) by Harrison (1986), who transferred the species to a new genus and changed the latin ending of the species name to the plural *-orum* (at John's suggestion) to reflect the name's reference to both him and Judith.

<sup>2</sup>John has also been honored with a number of patronymic species names, including *Paramysis vancouveringi* Voicu 1981, an upper Miocene statolith from Transylvania; *Ponceamina vancouveringi* Seiglie 1991, an agglutinated foraminifera, and *Provisocyntra vancouveringi* Nestell and Nestell 2021, a Permian radiolarian from Texas. See the cover of this issue and the caption on page 100.

main of research and contribute immensely important publications. He authored and co-authored nearly 100 scientific papers simultaneously covering fields as different as Biochronology, Chronostratigraphic Boundaries/Global standard Stratotype Sections and Points (GSSPs), Ecology and Paleocceanography, Time Scales, Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology, among other themes. Through his work, John contributed to the documentation of the record of hominoids (e.g., Conroy et al. 1992; Encyclopedia of Human Evolution 2000) and to the correlation of vertebrate fauna (e.g., Bernor et al. 1996), eventually realizing his long-term objective to build a system of land mammal ages for the whole Cenozoic of Africa (Van Couvering and Delson 2020). John proved to be equally at ease with both the terrestrial and marine records of the Neogene, contributing to the first firm correlation between the two (e.g., Van Couvering and Miller 1971; Berggren and Van Couvering 1974a). He was a stark defender of stratigraphic principles and rules as a basis for reliable scientific communication, calling for logic to reconcile differing viewpoints among researchers (e.g., McGowan et al. 2008; Van Couvering et al. 2009). Among others, John introduced with Bill (Berggren) the concept of *biochronology*, and *datum planes* (First and Last appearance datums; FAD and LAD) and showed the way to integrated stratigraphy and numerical dating of chronostratigraphic boundaries (Berggren and Van Couvering 1974a). Among the most publicized and controversial scientific cases in chronostratigraphy of the last fifteen years, we may recall John's strong commitment with several of us in defense of the Neogene System/Period, which was decapitated (2009) by the International Commission on Stratigraphy for the benefit of the Quaternary System/Period. This was achieved with both 1) the violation of all previous usages and concepts and 2) the relocation of the Pleistocene Series in the Quaternary System with complete disregard of the rules and principles of chronostratigraphy. Although this case may be seen today as old history, it has created a crippling divide in the Cenozoic community that has not been resolved to this day.

Somehow, paleoanthropology led John to micropaleontology. A major question he pondered in the early seventies was: how could one understand evolution on land without a handle on marine stratigraphy? Marine biostratigraphy/biochronology was then at the center of Bill's scientific interests, using deep sea sequences recovered from the Deep Sea Drilling Project to date micropaleontological events. This common interest shared by John and Bill naturally led to an everlasting friendship supported by a steady flow of letters from 1970 until John moved to New York. From then on, Bill's visits to the AMNH became a regular routine to keep up with the latest findings in the stratigraphic communities. Fruitful collaboration ensued, resulting in authoritative publications among which *The Late Neogene* (Berggren and Van Couvering 1974a), and from which the Cenozoic time scale would eventually arise (Berggren et al. 1985a, b). Through this collaboration John became knowledgeable about using planktonic foraminifera as a dating tool. Soon, other stratigraphically significant species of microfossils (coccolithophores, diatoms, ostracods, radiolarians, etc.) became familiar as well; in the meantime, the profession had noticed John's editorial talent. When the editorial position became available at AMNH, John was already prepared for dealing with the extensive documentation at Micropress. At the same time as John was embracing a new career, and already separated from his first wife, he began a new family after marrying Dr. Enid Schildkrout, then Curator of African Ethnology in the Department of Anthropology. at AMNH, with whom he had adorable





We would like to pay homage to our friend John by reproducing here a figure first published in black and white in *The Late Neogene* (Berggren and Van Couvering 1974a). It was conceived by John as a symbol of marine-terrestrial stratigraphic correlation, and it remains as modern today as it was innovative in 1974. “*Hipparion* (a three toed horse) with *Globigerina nepenthes* Todd (a planktonic foraminifer) in its jaw. The initial appearance of these two forms have been radiometrically dated at about 12.5 m.y. ago and symbolizes the correlation between marine and continental biostratigraphic events and their calibration to a biochronologic time scale”. This color version has not been published before.

twins, Alicia and Benjamin. Those of us who visited John (and possibly his family) in the late seventies and early eighties may remember his spacious office and the large room where catalogues were being prepared. One may also remember the cramped space to which Micropress was moved in the basement at AMNH, with John’s office at the entrance of the facility, barely separated from a long room encumbered with tables occupied by collectors, editors and translators, shelves of catalogues, and file cabinets full of documentation. Despite the contrast, either place was a paradise for collecting and organizing the published information that remains invaluable to micropaleontologists worldwide in academia, geological surveys and oil companies (whose financial support continues to be invaluable).

John’s achievements during his tenure at Micropress are considerable and beyond measurement in terms of his publication record (see above). He was much more than executive of a non-profit publishing enterprise. Notably, he was an active member (2002–2016) of the North American Commission on Stratigraphic Nomenclature, and of the Paleogene (1998–2003 and Neogene (1992–2005) Subcommissions of the International Commission of Stratigraphy (ICS). He participated in

working groups on chronostratigraphic boundaries such as the Paleocene/Eocene and the Plio/Pleistocene boundaries and he co-organized workshops, conferences, and a remarkable exhibition “*Ancestors: 4 Million Years of Humanity*,” at AMNH where he also held the position of Research Associate. Moreover, since 1991, he was adjunct Professor of Anthropology at the CUNY Graduate Center teaching seminars and engaging in field work in Kenya and Namibia with colleagues and students. In a different realm of activities, John introduced the scientific journal *Stratigraphy*, first published in Fall 2004 with a view to encourage integration of stratigraphic methods and “to explore broad ideas in earth history”. *Stratigraphy* currently serves as “the journal of record for the North American Commission on Stratigraphic Nomenclature” (<https://www.micropress.org/stratigraphy.html>). With collaborators he continued publication of the Ellis and Messina catalogues, with over 40 catalogues on foraminifera (Van Couvering et al. 1978–2022a), 40 catalogues on ostracods (Van Couvering et al. 1978–2022b), and more than 10 volumes published on diatoms (Van Couvering et al. 1978–2016). Perhaps the least known of his scientific activities was editing, tedious work that absorbs a considerable amount of time and patience. Some of his editing is well recognized by the community (e.g., Van Couvering 1977c, Tattersall et al., Eds. 1988,

2000) but other contributions were generous, done simply to help his friends and/or for the sheer pleasure of learning. John loved to write, which he did first and foremost to learn. For him, to communicate through writing came second to learning through writing. However, in communicating science he used words like a gardener choosing cultivars, always searching for the most appropriate phrase to accurately express a thought, a concept, or simply to describe an object or report data. It was fascinating to witness him playing with words and phrases as others might play with chess pieces.

Amidst all these activities, John never lost his deep love of nature. He grew to hold a lasting fascination for the tiny organisms capable of secreting a skeleton. He was dazzled by how prolific they are today and have been through time as they built, layer by layer, thick sedimentary units stretching across oceans. He was captivated by their ever-changing morphologic diversity. He was enchanted by the repetitive patterns found in some and the way phylogeny could be reconstructed through them. Above all, he was seduced by their beauty. Please take a moment, and listen to the interview granted to him by Melissa Block on NPR's "All Things Considered" radio program (<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1572223>) around the time Micropress had to move out of AMNH.

John possessed great humanity. Socially, he was a most kind man, gentle and generous, a truthful friend with deep sensibility and concerns for the wellbeing of others. At the office, he protected those who worked for him often against his own interest. Professionally, it was a pleasure working with him, for the depth and breadth of his thinking, his extensive knowledge and understanding in so many fields, and his generosity in sharing his ideas. His profound intellectual integrity, surrounded by a halo of humility, wisdom, and youthfulness, was a model that put everyone at ease. From the time I (Marie) met John in 1978 he became my mentor, a cherished one, not as something established on paper, but as a fact that established itself over the years. He has profoundly influenced my thinking, and his subtle words of caution and encouragement have resonated with me. The Earth Sciences Community, and particularly the stratigraphic and paleontological communities, have lost a passionate, engaged, broadly thinking, and original colleague who, until the end, contributed wholeheartedly to the activities of the scientific organizations he belonged to. With all those who knew him we have lost a dear friend. Above all, John loved his family. Our heart goes to his six children and nine grand-children and to his wife, Dr. Enid Schildkrout (now Curator Emerita of African Ethnology at AMNH) who organized a moving memorial in the All Souls Church in New York City (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1dxrHCXzS8>).

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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