

## **British Antarctic Survey: Oral History Recording**

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### **Dr Richard M Laws' Retirement Presentation - 30 April 1987**

#### **Recorded at British Antarctic Survey**

##### **Part 1(A)**

Nigel Bonner : [tape starts in the middle of a sentence] ... attention, and now that Seamus has gone to sit down, I think that's probably possible [lots of laughter from the audience]. I'll start my well-rehearsed address for this afternoon.

We're having this occasion now because [laughter] after fourteen years as Director of BAS, Dick Laws is stepping down and we're going to have a new Director as from next month. Well, Dick has already told you this afternoon something of his early history in FIDS, as it was then – how he joined the old John Biscoe. We think of the present vessel as the old John Biscoe, but he no doubt thinks of it still as the new John Biscoe. How he joined the old John Biscoe in 1947 and went down in rather remarkable circumstances, with a truly remarkable crew, to relieve Gordon Robin as Base Commander at Signy Island, which was then of course the new Base H, still quite a new idea after the Cape Geddes hut.

Dick was the first biologist to be appointed by FIDS and it was quite a long time before they appointed another, though I'm sure that's purely coincidence. He'd studied Biology at St. Catharine's College here in Cambridge, though he'd initially set out to study medicine, and when he got to Signy he was able, after a little prompting from Brian Roberts, who even in those days was a very experienced Antarctic biologist. Dick started work on the biology of the elephant seals and he produced a study of elephant seals which stands, still today, as the foremost study of a wild animal. And at the time, it could be argued that the series of papers he produced on the southern elephant seal tells more about this animal than any other wild mammal.

In 1951, he moved to South Georgia to the government station at King Edward Point, which was then a FIDS base - M, and there he continued his studies on elephant seals, but this time he was working with an elephant seal industry. The whalers at Compania Argentina de Pesca were shooting elephant seals for their blubber oil and they were shooting too many. It was a typical example of wild resource exploitation and Dick was able to use the techniques that he had developed at Signy to analyse the situation as it then was at South Georgia and to propose regulatory measures, which would put that elephant seal industry on a sound footing. And I think I was very fortunate that I was able to follow him some years later to put into effect the techniques which he had devised and which did indeed put the South Georgia elephant seal industry on a very sound footing, so that it was a model of that type of exploitation of a resource.

He returned in 1953 and took his PhD – I think you returned a bit before that didn't you, Dick? Perhaps 1952? And took your PhD in 1953, and then moved on – that was on his elephant seal work – and then moved on to work at the National Institute of Oceanography, which is now the Institute of Oceanographical Sciences, but I'm sure that Dick thought he

was in fact joining the Discovery Committee, which had been incorporated in NIO some years before, because he was then working with whales. And he went down to the Antarctic again on the floating factory ship Balaena and acted as a whaling inspector, while at the same time collecting valuable scientific data on reproduction and age in the whales. He was using the same sorts of techniques that he had used for his elephant seal studies and combining the understanding of the age structure of the population, this time using laminations in ear plugs and corpora albicantia in ovaries rather than the incremental growth rings in teeth that he had developed in the elephant seals, he was using these to analyse the structure of the population through its reproductive phases.

In 1961, he left NIO and went out to East Africa for a further period of research on large mammals. I think Dick is unaware of the fact that there are mice and voles and things like that [laughter from the audience], which attract so many more mammalogists than do these very large mammals.

In East Africa, he was working on elephants and hippos. I'm not being quite fair, because he has in fact looked at many other aspects, he's not a narrowed specialist, as I'm sure I need tell no-one, but he certainly has shown a penchant for the very largest that the mammalian series can provide.

In 1969, he came back to this country and re-joined FIDS, or BAS as it had by that time become, and he re-joined to be Head of the Life Sciences Division. BAS was beginning to get a proper organisational structure, but it was particularly Dick's efforts in the Life Sciences Division that created the sort of structure which the Life Sciences Division has, or the two Life Sciences divisions have today, and which has spread to the other divisions of, as he has said this afternoon, passing the command structure down through the groups.

In 1973, he became Director in succession to Sir Vivian Fuchs and I'm sure he saw that as an honour, because BAS was in those days a remarkable organisation. But it wasn't entirely a happy affair, because it was just about at that time that the resources of BAS were beginning to decline. Dick has been through the history of those events in some detail this afternoon, so I won't repeat them, but despite the declining resources, he was able to create an organisation which was ever more productive and which reached a standard of unparalleled effectiveness in Antarctic research. Antarctic research is necessarily an expensive business, but it's very much more expensive for most organisations, very much more expensive than it is in BAS.

The Argentinian invasion in 1982 created changes in our status and Dick has explained how, perhaps at last, we can see a satisfactory resolution of our problems. I am sure all of you who heard him speak this afternoon will realise what tremendous efforts he had to make to ensure that that resolution came about. I think it's very difficult for most people in BAS really to understand the sorts of problems that go on at the higher levels of government organisation. We all have a comforting thought that in fact the country is well run and that good advice is given to senior administrators who act confidently on it. Well, it's not like that at all [laughter]. Things have to be pushed by those that know and they tend to be the people at the sharp end. It took Dick a tremendous amount of pushing to achieve the results that he has and I know that this has been at some cost to some of his other interests.

He's had many other interests. Since returning to BAS he has been a major force in the Antarctic theatre generally. He's been a member of the SCAR Working Group on Biology since 1969 and he became its Chairman in 1980, standing down in 1986. He's been the

Convenor of the Group of Specialists on Seals since 1972, a member of the BIOMASS Executive since 1983 and the permanent delegate to SCAR from 1984. He has made a notable contribution to two important international conventions – the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Seals, well perhaps that's not so important because it's never actually been tested, but the reason it's never actually been tested may well be because the Convention was negotiated. And the other convention was the Convention for Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, or CCAMLR, and that has been tested and some of us may well feel that it would have stood up better to that test if Dick had been as closely associated with the execution of CCAMLR as he was in its design.

And besides BAS, he acquired the directorship of another NERC unit, the Sea Mammal Research Unit, in 1977. I'm not going to say anything about that, because John Harwood is going to say something afterwards.

He's been the Secretary of the Zoological Society of London since 1984 and I don't know what on earth induced him to take that on, because he must have known that it was going to be a very difficult job, he can't have imagined a speedy solution was on the horizon for the many troubles that afflict the Zoo today, but he is grappling manfully with those, as he did with the BAS problems, so if he can get the same sort of result for the Zoo, then I dare say the admission fees will go down a bit.

He's been the Master of St. Edmund's College since 1985. One might note that it was St. Edmund's House when he joined it, it's now St. Edmund's College, it'll probably be an independent university before too long.

But despite all this activity, Dick has still found time for science, which has always been his primary interest. I think we all know he's not been able to find as much time as he would have liked. I remember when he was so carefully planning the organisation of BAS when he was newly appointed Director, he'd devised a small Director's group, which I think he hoped to see leading research initiatives. Well, sadly, that Director's group has never come into being, some people have considered themselves lucky to come to BAS and work with Dick, I'm thinking particularly of John Bengtson, but it's not been a BAS group which he could have led. But, nevertheless, the papers have come out, he's edited or authored four books and he's written about 130 scientific papers and that's a remarkable achievement for somebody who in the last decade and a half has had to spend so very much of his time on administrative matters. I think he takes a particular pleasure in the latest publication to appear - Antarctic Science – the book which has just come out, which has been edited by David Walton and written by members of the Survey.

His scientific merit was recognised in 1980 when he was elected to fellowship of the Royal Society, the highest honour that this country can bestow, and he was awarded the CBE in 1983.

Well, it's a moving occasion when such a person leaves as close a circle as BAS and we thought we would like to give him a memento of his period associated with the Antarctic and it wasn't very easy to think what this might be. It's difficult to get a stuffed elephant seal into the country now because of the CITES legislation. But we felt that we might very well present him with a book, which is made up of press cuttings and photographs and little bits of text, which relate from the early days. Actually, it starts off with an entry from "Who's Who", but the Antarctic episodes date from a newspaper cutting, "North East men off to

Antarctic”. And there’s a picture of twenty-one year old Richard Maitland Laws [lots of laughter] of Whitley Bay [laughter again] about to join the old John Biscoe. It finishes with some pages of signatures of people in the Survey and the most recent photographs are from a very enjoyable dinner we had last Tuesday - what am I saying - last Saturday, at Homerton College.

Obviously, a very large number of people had to contribute to a work such as this and we’ve managed to get photographs from people outside the Survey, or people who were once in the Survey and now are no longer with us. And I seem to have left the crib card I had that gave all their names up in my room, so I’ll have to try and remember who they were [laughter]. I can mention Arthur Baker, Morton Boyd, Peter Foxton. Well, I’m sorry to have forgotten these people’s names [laughter], they were on the tip of my tongue a moment ago. Keith Eltringham from the East African period. But perhaps I can draw those to you attention later, Dick. And recall some of the people in the Survey who were very closely concerned with the production of this. First of all, there are our two illustrators – Roger Missing and Tony Sylvester; our photographers – Brian Thomas and Chris Gilbert, and of course Anne Todd’s expertise was absolutely essential to pull this all together. And Bernard Moran did the whole work of editing and designing and commissioning the binding.

So I hope that you will accept this from all of us as a memento of what has been for us a very fortunate time and most of the time, a very happy time. I hope that this will serve to remind you of the happy times and to know that our good wishes for the future goes with it. [applause].

There’s also the traditional leaving card, but we had to have one custom-designed because we couldn’t get all the signatures on the commercial varieties and we would like to ....

Dick Laws : This won’t go in the album, you know [laughter].

Nigel Bonner : Maureen, take it.

Maureen Laws : Thank you very much, lovely, thank you. It’s beautiful.

Dick Laws: Can I, can I speak now, Nigel?

Nigel Bonner : Yes, I think we can. Would you like the microphone?

Dick Laws : Thank you Nigel very much for what you’ve said, which, it is for me a very moving occasion and I’ve enjoyed my time with FIDS and BAS enormously, in spite of all the problems. It’s very good of you all to mark this occasion in this way and I know that I will treasure the book and I shall have great fun deciphering the signatures on the elephant-sized card. I feel that the Survey is in a time of change, there are the older hands, like myself, are leaving. Ray Adie left, Charles recently left us and now Eric and Anne Todd and then Nigel himself will be going. But I think it is essentially a young organisation, it always has been a young organisation and that’s because it depends very much on the young contract workers who do all the work, really. And one of the great pleasures for me has been my trips to the Antarctic. I particularly enjoyed the last visit I made, when I managed to get to all the bases, except Grytviken, which of course is no longer ours, but may become ours again fairly soon. And it was a great pleasure to see how well they’re being run, what high morale there is and how everything is really in tip top form, both on the bases and on the ships and in the air

unit. And that of course extends to this headquarters. I think anyone, one of the great pleasures of being Director of BAS is when one has any visitors coming to be shown round, they're always quite amazed at what goes on here and the quality of the staff and I always get the most genuine expressions of pleasure at seeing such a lively organisation.

Only on Tuesday, I think it was, this week, Lady Young gave a party for me at the Foreign Office, which I think shows the esteem in which the Foreign Office hold the organisation, and she went out of her way to say how much she remembered that visit, which I mentioned earlier this afternoon. And I'm quite sure that that had a very great influence on subsequent events. Just meeting the people in the Survey and hearing what they were doing, what their aspirations were and seeing their quality. So, for any Director and particularly for me, it's quite marvellous to have an organisation of such calibre.

I remember the early days, which Nigel mentioned and then when I went South I had a month, it might have been two months, but it sounds better if I say a month, to learn all about the elephant seal, and buy all my equipment and do all my reading, and go off on the ship and, without any real preparation, be left at Signy for a couple of years, initially with two companions. I think we do do things better now, in that there is quite a bit more thought given to what people are going to do and to preparing them for it and training them and supervising the work. In those days of course communication was very infrequent, we managed to go off the air for three months on one occasion, which saved us a lot of trouble responding to headquarters, of course.

But it is a splendid organisation and I think that it's still as exciting. I still vividly recall those early days and I'm sure that Fids are having just as good times, a little more safely perhaps, as we did in the forties and fifties. I must confirm in fact that we did indeed row to Coronation Island from Signy, as one of our first field trips. I hope no-one would do that today.

But, I think I have been fortunate to have what, as Nigel has indicated, is really a unique career over some forty years, which has taken me to the Antarctic a number of times, which has allowed me to work on Antarctic whales and has also given me the opportunity of working in the tropics in East Africa on elephants and hippopotamus. At that time, population ecology was just beginning as a science. I think I probably made the first mathematical model of a mammal population. It would be considered extremely crude now, but I was quite gratified that Seamus McCann felt that he could adapt it in his recent updating of my work in connection with the South Georgia elephant seal survey.

I managed to get into ecosystem studies in East Africa and into ecosystem studies in the Southern Ocean. I should say incidentally that my work on elephant seals was not actually directed at their exploitation, it was that I found when I went there that they were being over-exploited and the results of my work were that the new regulations which I was able to introduce put the industry on a really rational basis and enabled it to continue; it could have continued indefinitely if the whaling industry hadn't come to an end.

I had my first experience of management at 21, when I was the Base Leader at Signy, and at 61 I think I have the most interesting, still for a day, I have the most interesting management job in Britain and probably in the world. It involves politics, as you heard this afternoon, and I was bloodied in conservation politics in East Africa than which there is nothing more ruthless, Antarctic politics of course are absorbing and international, and you've heard

something about NERC politics today. They, the East African experience was a very good training for that [laughter].

I've had enormous opportunities for very diverse activities, like polar travel and African safaris, big game hunting and whaling and sealing, scuba diving and bush flying and I've had the excitement that goes with those kind of activities, some of which you know.

There's been the challenge of building up effective research groups, first in East Africa and the Nuffield Unit of Tropical Animal Ecology, which I started in 1961 from Cambridge University, is now the Uganda Institute of Ecology and celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary last December.

BAS – well, you've heard a lot about BAS – the development and the recent history is something that has given me a great deal of pleasure and it's been a particular pleasure to work with the kind of people that we can attract to work with this organisation. Times have changed. As I said, we give much more account of health and safety in a dangerous environment. I'm very sad that in my fourteen years I've lost nine people in four separate incidents, accidents, each one of which was avoidable and was an error of judgement and I hope that these will be minimised, possibly will not recur in the future, because each has been very traumatic for BAS as an organisation and the strength of the organisation has been shown in the way that we have survived them – even a war in the South Atlantic.

In all of these activities with BAS, I've been extremely well served by the BAS staff, by all of you, and it would I know be invidious to single out people, but I'm going to do so. But just to mention a few and the fact that I haven't mentioned you all is just that there isn't time for that. But I would particularly like to thank Marj Hallatt, wherever she is, I hope she's here. Because a Director really only is as good as his Personal Assistant and Marj has been absolutely superb in the years that she has helped me, supported me. Nigel Bonner – you've heard how we have been friends and colleagues for a very long time, and of course we're both, we both work on the right sort of animals [laughter] and I'm delighted that Nigel is going to carry BAS through this interim period of my retirement and the accession of a new Director. John Bawden has been a very important element in the success story that I outlined to you this afternoon and I think, again, that I must express my very great thanks to John for his loyalty in extremely difficult times and his integrity and support in all those battles that have been fought and mostly won. We haven't won them all, but we won most of them.

And there are many others, of course, which I can only mention as groups - the divisions, the sections, the central services groups, computing and electronics, the illustrators, the PR section. The Antarctic sciences scientists and support staff I've mentioned, but the ships and the air unit – everyone has had a very important part to play in this splendid organisation, and most important of all, I must mention the support I've had from Maureen, who has had a very difficult time over most of the period that I have been Director. She's seen much less of me than I hope she would have liked [laughter]. I've certainly seen much less of her than I would have liked.

But as you heard this afternoon, I think that BAS is very soundly based, I think that it will go on to do very great things and it's only really beginning now in 1987. I'm happy and proud to be handing over such a vital and important organisation with the high morale, the excellent facilities, the good ideas for future work and the potential for that future. And although he isn't here, I think, this afternoon, I would like to welcome David Drewry as your new

Director and wish him very well in taking up the struggle on your behalf and on BAS's behalf, to keep what I think is a very special organisation on a sound course.

So I would just end by thanking all of you for all your support over the years. I'm sorry I've seen so little of you in recent years and I hope to remedy that when I'm freed of the administrative problems and of course I'll naturally follow all the future developments with very great interest. Thank you all and thank you for making this such a happy and splendid occasion for me. Thank you. [applause].

Nigel Bonner : I'd just like to read one or two telegrams that have come in on this occasion. One here for Dr Laws from Doug Allan at Signy. "Thanks for all your help and encouragement in the past and all the best for your post-BAS plans. See you down here some time. Regards, Doug". And from Rick Price at Signy, "The time for your retirement from the Survey approaches. All of us remaining on Signy would like to take this opportunity to wish you a happy, fruitful and enjoyable retirement. Time to pick up your paintbrush and palette again, perhaps." From Bransfield, "Officers, crew and Fids send sincere wishes for your retirement. Sorry we are unable to be there for your last day". And from Bob Headland at Longyearbyen, "Regards and best wishes for your retirement. Regret am at the Arctic end, but shall endeavour to attend in spirit". And I know there would have been many other telegrams coming in in response to your message.

And now I would like to propose a toast, a thanks to Dick and very best wishes for the future. Dick Laws.

Everyone : Dick Laws.

John Harwood : I don't have Nigel's experience of making a speech. I'm afraid I don't have Nigel's experience of making a speech and even if I did I'm sure I couldn't have matched his eloquence, so I shall be mercifully brief. We all feel very privileged to have had you as our Director for the last ten years and we're very sorry to see you leave. We very much hope that the extra time you may have will allow you to come perhaps on a few field trips with us and even perhaps a return to North Rhona. There are a few things we'd like to give you. You will see that in our continuing bid to make sure we're not confused with BAS, we've chosen a sea mammal that couldn't possibly [inaudible because of laughter]. The first thing is a very special fin whale timpanic buller, that just goes to show how pervasive the influence of SMRU has become under your directorship.

Dick Laws : That's beautiful [unwrapping present]. [oohs and aaahs from people present].

John Harwood : I wasn't very pleased with that [laughter again].

Dick Laws : I hope it wasn't too painful [laughter].

John Harwood : We're a humane organisation these days. And there is also a book which we also hope will rekindle your enthusiasm for painting again.

Dick Laws : Thank you, John. I must open it. [opening present]. Without killing too many polar bears in the process [laughter]. Oh, how did you guess? I was just plucking up courage to buy this book [lots of laughter]. Actually, plucking up courage to brave Maureen's wrath [lots of laughter] that I'd bought yet another book [laughter].

John Harwood : Finally, there's a very modest card by comparison. We're a modest organisation. Anyway, thank you very much for all the years with us, we're very grateful.

Dick Laws : Thank you John. [applause from audience]. Actually, when I compare the card [laughter], the relative sizes, I think SMRU have been very immodest [laughter]. But thank you very much, John. It's given me very great pleasure to work with SMRU, to be chosen as Director of SMRU, which you know, but not everyone will know, incorporated the whale research unit with which I used to work, a part of which I was when I was in the old National Institute of Oceanography, before I went to Africa. It was formed by the amalgamation of the seals research division of IMER - a BAS accession - or Cambridge accession, and the whales research unit of IOS, and it gave me very great pleasure to be invited to be the Director of the SMRU. It is, as those of you who work in this building will know, particularly the biologists, a very highly regarded international, highly regarded internationally as an organisation and as a biologist interested in population ecology and population dynamics, although my own contributions date from some way back, I followed with very great interest the enormous strides that have been made within SMRU, which has brought it to the forefront I think on the international scene in this particular part of science.

I've enjoyed the contacts I've had with people in the unit, sadly, fewer in recent years because of the other problems, but I'm very glad to have an invitation to go back to North Rhona, and I'll take you up on that one, and I hope of course that I will have more time now to drop in and see what's going on, but I really wouldn't wish in any way to minimise the pleasure I've had from being associated with SMRU. Although it's small in relation to BAS, that also means it's given me much fewer problems [laughter], and that of course is, to a very great degree, a reflection of the calibre of the people in the unit and of John Harwood who is the officer in charge. I'm really a Director, in a way as an administrative convenience. John does all the work and I've been able to reap some of the admiration of the work that's done.

John Harwood : that's much more modest than our card words [laughter].

Dick Laws : I think it's been rather special that we have had a group like SMRU within the BAS scene and I think there have been a lot of friendships and contacts made and joint fieldwork, culminating last year of course in the South Georgia trip, which involved BAS and SMRU biologists, and I hope that that will be possible in the future also.

So thank you very much John for your kindness, for these gifts, which I will treasure and get much pleasure from.

John Harwood : Thank you.

Dick Laws : It's a very special occasion for me and to see you all here today. Thank you. [applause].