



Mary R. Dawson (1931–2020)

Mary R. Dawson was born February 27, 1931. She studied veterinary medicine at Michigan State College (now Michigan State University) before switching to a zoology major. After obtaining a B.S. in 1952, she went for a year to the Institute of Animal Genetics of the University of Edinburgh on a Fulbright scholarship. She earned her Ph.D. in 1957 from the University of Kansas based on a thesis on North American fossil lagomorphs; her doctoral advisor was Robert Warren Wilson (1909–2006). For most of her career, Mary was connected to Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she started in 1962 as a Research Associate; eight years later, she was promoted to full Curator. From 1973 to 1997, Mary chaired the museum's Earth Sciences Division, and, upon her retirement in 2003, she was recognized as Curator Emerita. She passed away on November 29, 2020.

Mary Dawson's research concerned the anatomy and evolution of Cenozoic mammals, especially lagomorphs and rodents, with a focus on their fossil record. Her expertise in the latter group is perhaps best evidenced by her work on the Laotian rockrat, *Laonastes aenigmamus*. Originally considered the only known member of a new rodent family (Laonastidae), shortly after its discovery, Mary and colleagues reinterpreted *Laonastes* as a member of Diatomyidae, a hystricomorph rodent family that until then had been regarded as extinct for 11 million years (Dawson et al. 2006). Between 1973 and 2002, Mary spent 11 field seasons in the Canadian Arctic (see Fig. 1; Eberle and McKenna 2007). Ellesmere Island yielded early Eocene vertebrates, including crocodylians and turtles, which provided fossil evidence for a warm climate about 55 million years ago (Dawson et al. 1976). The discovery of the early Miocene basal pinniped *Puijila darwini* on Devon Island (Rybczynski et al. 2009) was a fitting coda to Mary's nearly four decades of polar paleontological research. Dr. Dawson was also one of the first American paleontologists to be invited to China as the country started opening to the West, thanks to her hosting visiting Chinese scholars at the Carnegie Museum during the 1980s. Her collaborative research on the middle Eocene Shanghuang fissure fillings of southeastern China proved particularly fruitful, as evidenced by the discovery of the primate *Eosimias sinensis* (Beard et al. 1994).

Mary Dawson was made an Honorary Member of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology in 1999 (she had been a member of the Society since 1954, and served as its President from 1973 to 1974), and in 2002 she became the first American woman to receive the Romer–Simpson Medal, the Society's highest award. Other awards and honors include the Arnold Guyot Memorial Award (1981), conferred by the National Geographic Society in recognition of her research in the High Arctic, Doctor of Humane Letters honoris causa from Chatham College (1999), honorary Doctor of Science from Michigan State University (2005), and Fellow of the Paleontological Society (2006).

I (ŁF-F) first met Mary briefly in 2001, at a conference in Europe, when I was just beginning my doctoral work. The second time we met, I was a freshly minted Ph.D., on my first postdoctoral fellowship at the Carnegie Museum, where Mary was Curator Emerita. That time seemed to me to be the golden age of mammalian paleontology at the museum, where Mary worked alongside fellow renowned fossil mammal experts Chris Beard, Zhe-Xi Luo, and John Wible. I remember Mary as full of positive energy and



Fig. 1. Mary Dawson in the Canadian Arctic (1976); photo by Malcolm C. McKenna, courtesy of Priscilla McKenna.

enthusiasm, planning a new field trip to the Arctic or some other remote corner of the world, and always willing to share her knowledge on lagomorphs. She was thrilled that a half-century after her Ph.D. another bunny aficionado was finally around.

The other of us (MCL) first met Mary three years later. In 2004 I was hired as Assistant Curator of Vertebrate Paleontology at the Carnegie Museum, in part to supervise the construction of its new dinosaur exhibition. I had the honor to know her for 16 years, all of which she spent as Curator Emerita, still making the hour-long journey from her 19th century farmhouse to the museum every weekday until the COVID-19 pandemic forced our temporary closure. Mary was a true living legend, the matriarch of vertebrate paleontology at our museum, but despite her eminence she was also exceedingly humble and beloved by virtually everyone who had the pleasure of knowing her. She and I traded many a good-natured barb over the relative research merits of dinosaurs versus mammals, and I sat in awe of her lunchtime tales of Arctic paleontological adventures. There will never be another Mary R. Dawson.

References

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