



DR. ROBERT HENRY CLARKE  
OCEANOGRAPHER, M.A.(OXON),  
DR. PHILOS. (OSLO) 1919-2011<sup>1</sup>

Obla Paliza, Aravek Clarke, Suyana Clarke,  
and George Clarke

<sup>1</sup>Four other In Memoriams for Robert have recently appeared:  
Anonymous (published in 2011 with 2009 date), Aguayo Lobo  
(2011a, 2011b), and Paliza *et al.* (2011).

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Robert Clarke arrived to South America in 1958 to do research on whales, and during that year he programmed work at the Institute of Marine Biology in Montemar, Chile, the Council for Hydrological Research in Perú, and the Ecuadorian Navy. He trained biologists from Chile, Ecuador, and Perú on the observation and marking of whales, and also on the collection of samples from the whaling stations. From 1959 to 1962 the whale research programme was managed by the Fisheries and Agricultural Organization (FAO) until 1964, when the Instituto del Mar del Perú (IMARPE) was created. The newly trained biologists were sent to work on the whaling platforms of Iquique and Talcahuano in Chile, and Paita and Pisco in Perú; and the most important results were published in the six volumes of *Sperm whales of the Southeast Pacific*. The seventh and last volume of the series is published here in the *Latin American Journal of Aquatic Mammals* (LJAM), completing in this way the research on whales in the Southeast Pacific (SEP). Apart from sperm whales (*Physeter catodon*), Robert researched other cetacean in the area, such as the southern right whale (*Eubalaena australis*), the Bryde's whale (*Balaenoptera edeni*), the blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*) around the Galápagos Islands, the pygmy fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*) and the pygmy right whale (*Caperea marginata*).

Robert's work in the SEP has contributed substantially to the understanding of cetaceans, especially for research related to the sperm whale in that region; and some of the results have helped alert the authorities of the alarming decrease of the population of whales and Humboldt Current squids (*Dosidicus gigas*), consequently taking the

necessary measures to deal with the situation. When his research showed that the whales captured off the coasts of Chile and Perú formed part of the same and unique population (1968), and that there was continuity and/or contiguity with genetic exchange between whales of the North and South Pacific, and the southern Indian Ocean (1972), it was possible to suggest to the Comisión Permanente del Pacífico Sur (CPPS) and the International Whaling Commission (IWC) to work together, because both commissions were effectively controlling the hunt of the same population. As a result Chile and Perú became members of the IWC.

The evidence of the over-exploitation of whales in the SEP (1980) lead to a warning to the IWC which then carried out a study of the population of whales in 'division 9' (the southern area of the Southeast Pacific) concluding that, indeed, an alarming decrease had been identified. As a consequence, the IWC recommended zero catches in that area in 1982 and later in 1986 a worldwide ban. In 1988 it was estimated that from 1959 to 1961 the population of sperm whales in the SEP had consumed between 8 and 13 million tons of Humboldt Current squid per year. Taking into account the enormous abundance of squid in the area, a controlled and monitored industrial exploitation was recommended.

In Perú exploitation was intensive in the 1990s, but unfortunately poorly monitored, which put squid existence in serious danger. Some years later, in whale observation expeditions in the north of Perú and Ecuador up to the Galápagos Islands in 2001 reported no sperm whales. This suggested that the lack of food due to the

indiscriminate exploitation of the giant squid had probably forced the whales to migrate<sup>2</sup> to richer waters. The biology of the Humboldt Current squid was studied in the year 2000, and the research proved that the female spawned twice a year, in May and December (Clarke and Paliza, 2000); consequently, a ban was recommended during those months in order to protect the spawning squids, something that to this date has not yet been implemented.

In *The origin of ambergris* (Clarke, 2006) Robert draws all data available and, together with his own research, describes the formation of the ambergris coprolite in the sperm whale and its importance as a natural fixative in the perfume industry. Robert was author/co-author of more than 100 scientific publications on whales, whaling history and folklore, open boat whaling, the giant squid, among others. He was an active member of the IWC (1955-1970) and of numerous international scientific societies.

From this short summary of Robert's life we must emphasize his adventurous spirit, always willing to face new challenges and risks, and encouraging his family to live and work with passion and without fear. Among his many phrases he had one he always cited in challenging situations: 'keep the old flag flying!', a romantic phrase he adopted from the war jargon that faithfully reflected his philosophy of life. As a hedonist, he was keenly interested in good food, music, and literature; and in his later years he spent many afternoons rereading his collections of the complete works of Joseph Conrad and Herman Melville, two of his most admired authors.

Robert had many fascinating stories from his experience during the Second World War, and although many remained untold, at least we know some that will surely escape oblivion. One of the most dramatic stories tells that he formed part of a group of 50 volunteers whose mission was to dismantle unexploded mines and bombs in strategic areas in the South-East Asian theatre. In order to execute their job successfully these brave men had to resort more to their instinct and imagination than to their technical knowledge. From the 50 men that began the mission only 2 survived. Robert was one of them. He told us that he chose this job because if he were to die doing his duty he would find a quick, clean, and painless death. Life is a great gift that must be enjoyed as a whole; he couldn't conceive a diminished or limited life. So sitting on a 500 kilogramme unexploded bomb was the best way to go for all or nothing. It was victory or death. Before starting his dismantling work Robert would smoke a cigarette with complete tranquillity and patience, because he knew that it could very well be his last one. On one occasion he heard the unmistakable sound of the glass crystals breaking in the lead

tube of the mine, a sound that meant certain death. Paralysed, he waited for the explosion. But luckily, the explosion never happened, so he managed to escape death one more time.

For a short time he lived with the Vedda people in Sri Lanka. In one of his walks in the jungle, he and his aborigine guide were chased by a herd of wild elephants. Fortunately for them there were many trees in the area, so they climbed up the closest tree as fast as they could and waited for the elephants to leave. But this didn't happen until dusk, so they had to spend all day in the trees. On another occasion, in 1956, during a break while he was working as scientific adviser for the film *Moby Dick* in the Azores, he went to see the festivities celebrated by the locals. In this festivity wild bulls were set free in the streets to be confronted by the public. Robert only wanted to take some photographs, but to his bad luck a bull chased him and while trying to escape he fell and hurt his knee; unable to run and with the bull cornering him against a wall, he stretched his arms up in the air looking for help. Luckily, dozens of hands responded his call and lifted him to safety just in time. A moment later the bull had stuck his horns into the wall.

As an example of the famous British calmness, Robert never panicked when in trouble; he always kept his cool. He would say: 'A gentleman must never run, only walk'; and he had the opportunity to prove this in 1965 when he was at the bar in Santiago de Chile airport waiting for our plane to land. Suddenly, a great earthquake shook the ground violently making everybody run for their life, including the bartender (who leaped over the counter with one hand in the best old Wild West fashion). Robert thought for a second: 'this could very well be my last drink', and after this vital reflection he stayed in the bar until he finished his glass of brandy. Then he walked out calmly.

In early 1971 Robert decided to move to Perú with his family to work as a fisherman searching for the great schools of striped tunny (*Sarda chiliensis chiliensis*) that would help feed the many families affected by the devastating earthquake of 1970. In one of his fishing expeditions the engine suddenly stopped leaving the boat floating helplessly near some dangerous rocks. The only escape was to fix the engine in time. But the crew, in an act of human desperation, abandoned all hope and fell to their knees on the deck to pray; only Robert kept on trying until he managed to start the engine just in time before hitting the rocks. Once more, his calmness in the most extreme situations was his salvation (another of his famous phrases was 'never panic'). With this feat he obtained the respect and admiration of the most experienced fishermen who used to say: 'in some way, Robert is more of a sea dog than we are'.

In 2007 a terrible earthquake and tsunami (7.9 in the Richter scale) struck the coastal city of Pisco<sup>3</sup> in Perú. The sea flooded our house destroying a third of the library, including important documents, scientific journals and practically all the furniture. At the time Robert was on the second floor

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<sup>2</sup> Jaquet, *et al.* (2003) found seven female sperm whales in the Gulf of California which had been photographed around the Galapagos Islands, showing there was a migration to the north.

having a glass of pisco and smoking, as he usually did before dinner. After the dreadful tremor all the family gathered in the sitting room on the ground floor in order to be nearer the front door in case we had to escape. Without knowing it, outside a powerful tsunami was making its way towards the garden, and after a few minutes the sea started to flood the house, so everybody had to run upstairs for safety. But once more Robert took his time to calmly save his glass of pisco and his packet of cigarettes while the water flooded the room. During that night and the next he slept in an armchair because he wouldn't sleep on a mattress on the floor, because this would mean wrinkling his suit. He always cared deeply about his appearance and manners.

Some months after the disaster he decided to write — in collaboration with his wife— a testimony for the future generations about the destruction Pisco suffered, which involved more than 500 dead, thousands of injured left homeless, besides the loss of almost all the city's historical monuments. The book *PISCO, History, biodiversity and industry before and after the earthquake of 2007* was presented at the town hall of San Andrés, Pisco in December 2010, and also in Lima at the beginning of February 2011. A few weeks later Robert fell ill of pneumonia and passed away peacefully in his house on the evening of May 8 after spending that same day watching the sea he loved so much and where, just as he had wished, his ashes now remain travelling endlessly in the Humboldt Current.

His philosophy of life was clear and simple, and to his children he would say: 'after a lifetime of studying, reading and writing, fighting in the war, surviving earthquakes and tsunamis, sailing the seven seas, and escaping wild elephants in Asia and similar dangers, I realize that our duty as a civilization is very simple: we are here to help each other, and that is what you should do'; wise and sincere words of a great man, gentleman, husband, and exemplary father. Robert is survived by his wife and colleague Obla, his children Aravec, Suyana and George, and his granddaughter Catherine.



Robert, Obla and Fernando Félix in a whale observation voyage near La Plata Island, Ecuador (1997). *Photo courtesy of Fernando Félix.*



A visit to Robert's house in San Andrés, Pisco (1994). (From left to right, Joanna Alfaro, David Montes, Robert Clarke, Karina Ontón, Catherine Rey Clarke [child], Marie-Francoise Van Bresseem, Koen Van Waerebeek and Obla Paliza). *Photo courtesy of Aravec Clarke.*



A visit to Robert's house in San Andrés, Pisco (1997). (From left to right, Koen Van Waerebeek, Julio Reyes, Robert Clarke and Obla Paliza). *Photo courtesy of Julio Reyes.*

<sup>3</sup>The word Pisco is used in two ways: the city of Pisco (the name of the city), and pisco (the name of a spirit used in pisco sour and other drinks).



### Brief Reminiscences From Close Colleagues

I clearly remember the first time we embarked on an observation voyage looking for whales off the coast of Chile. I was part of a group of biologists that set off from Valparaiso on board the *Indus X* under Robert's command for 14 days. On the first day watches of two hours were settled at the maintop. Robert asked for a space in the storeroom to be transformed into an office where he nailed a table to the floor. There we would all get together to receive instructions about whale watching, how to calculate our position, the course, and other observations. At the end of the voyage we were sailors, whalers, and even carpenters and mechanics. I have always thanked Robert for all his lessons, which gave fantastic results. Students need no external selection; no exams are necessary because the experience at sea is the best school for whale biologists. In that 2 week voyage I was never able to get up earlier than Robert. If I got up at 6 am, he was already on deck; if I got up at 5, he was on deck. Once I even got up at 4 and I found him on deck smoking a cigarette. He was like a ghost that never took his eyes off the sea.

*Anelio Aguayo*

In one of the voyages to assess the population of whales in the SEP in 2001, I joined a group of international scientists on board a ship from the Ecuadorian Navy called *Orion*. It was a 30 day cruise off the coasts of Ecuador, sailing north and south up to the Galápagos Islands. In those days Robert was 80 years old; no doubt one of the oldest researchers that ship must have carried on its oceanographic voyages. When he got on board, the captain, Commander Jorge Mera — a young officer who must have been half Robert's age — couldn't believe that someone that age was able to take part in such a long voyage. So, immediately he asked him to see the doctor for a check-up. Of course, he passed it without any problem, so we were able to continue with the original programme which included exhausting work shifts of up to 12 hours a day... At every moment Robert showed an incredible strength, as well as seriousness, dedication and responsibility towards his work. He was a great example of how to do science.

*Fernando Félix*



Robert and Eduardo in the balcony of Robert's house (2005). *Photo courtesy of Eduardo Secchi.*



Robert with Julio Reyes and Eduardo Secchi visiting ACOREMA (2005). *Photo courtesy of Eduardo Secchi.*



At the IWC meeting in Santiago (2008). From left to right: Ann-Katrien Lescrauwet, Marie-Francoise Van Bresse, Joanna Alfaro, Daniel Palacios, Obla and Robert. *Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Mangel.*

We fondly remember the days we spent at Robert and Obla's house in San Andrés, Pisco, returning from field work or taking a break from our daily research and educational activities in other fishing ports. Robert and Obla always welcomed us warmly with a delicious dinner—usually Peruvian cuisine—, after an inspiring pisco sour. We would brief the Clarkes about our cetacean work, invariably generating a lively and productive discussion. Then, to our delight, Robert spoke at length about his work with sperm whales and other whales, his many voyages, and learned life's lessons. Frank exchanges of thoughts on scientific, cultural, and global matters would come up naturally. For a long time Robert remained skeptic to the idea of a complete ban on small cetacean exploitation (recommended by our group), and for years he would defend the fisherman's point of view, until he observed an undeniable rise in our catch number estimates.

Next morning, Robert would wake us up at 05:45 with a bang at the door and a hearty seafaring song. Awaiting us was a strong coffee, a huge breakfast and 'una copita de pisco' served on the terrace where he would boast about San Andres' finest view of the Pacific, the Paracas Peninsula, and the Ballestas Islands. Again, conversations flowed and so did the enjoyment of the Clarkes' exceptional company and hospitality. Finally, Robert would drive us to the bus station in his 'autocar', a huge 1976 white Ford LTD. Then we would travel back with our heads full of his stories and a renewed inspiration.

*Marie-Francoise Van Bressem, Koen Van Waerebeek, Julio C. Reyes, and Joanna Alfaro*

I remember when Koen Van Waerebeek told me about Robert's long-lasting intention of publishing his manuscript on *The Origin of Ambergris*, and asked me to consider it for *LAJAM* (at the time I was the Editor-in-Chief). This happened in 2005, a few days before my planned trip to Perú with my wife, Rafaela, and a friend, Andréa. Koen put me in contact with Robert and Obla, who kindly invited us to stay at their home in San Andrés, Pisco. When we arrived, Robert was clearly anxious to show me the manuscript. I gladly received the paper and promised to read it as soon as possible (of course, in my mind, this would happen after my travels around Perú). During our two-day visit Robert asked me a few times if I had read the manuscript yet. Then I understood how important it was to read it before leaving. Our day before leaving Pisco was quite busy. In the morning we visited the Ballestas Islands, and in the afternoon we went to downtown Pisco to visit Julio Reyes and the Acorema Museum. Robert also joined us. In the evening Obla prepared an exquisite dinner: delicious grated scallops, and other seafood, drizzled with a vitalizing pisco sour.

After a pleasant conversation and a few glasses of pisco I went to bed quite tired, but I hadn't forgotten my promise of reading the 50 page-long manuscript. Once I started I could not stop until the last page, at around four in the morning. I felt so very privileged to have had the opportunity of evaluating a true masterpiece. The manuscript was rich with details and clear descriptions of facts which had happened even before my father was born. I was so anxious to demonstrate my satisfaction to Robert after reading the manuscript that I could not sleep anymore. I got out of bed and found that Robert was already outside drinking his *pisco mañanero* and smoking his cigarette waiting for me. His happiness to hear that I had felt honoured to read *The Origin of Ambergris*, and that it would be published at *LAJAM* was indescribable. He was so excited that he immediately invited me to see his impressive library and collection of ambergris. One of the pieces of ambergris, found in one of the whaling stations in the Azores in 1954 by Robert (collected in 1934), was given to me as a present which I now proudly show to anyone visiting my office. The pleasant moments spent with Robert and Obla listening to their stories while looking at the pelicans flying low over the Pacific Ocean were unforgettable.

*Eduardo Secchi*

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