

Tribute to “The Snake Man”, Francis Russell Cook, Ph.D., C.M. (1935–2020)

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The thundering, no-holds-barred belly-laugh was often what visitors first heard when entering the herpetology collection at the National Museum of Canada (NMC), now the Canadian Museum of Nature (CMN)—hereafter, “the Museum”. That ringing welcome was from a man who not only sounded like Santa Claus but could easily have been his slimmed-down double, twinkling eyes and all. Indeed, one winter’s day in a suburban mall, he was actually identified by an excited little boy as being the grand old man himself in civilian clothes (Frank Pope pers. comm. 15 June 2020). This jovial personality was especially appreciated during the time (1964–1993) when the collection and its associated offices were housed in mundane, rented commercial space in west end Ottawa, Ontario (ON) before they were transferred to the magnificent Natural Heritage Campus in Gatineau, Quebec (QC). Much more than just the laugh of this life-long herpetologist and long-time *Canadian Field-Naturalist* (CFN) editor was larger than life, however.

Francis Russell Cook (3 March 1935–3 January 2020), was one of those fortunate people who very early in life knew what he wanted to do, got to do it, and never regretted his choice. His passion for the study of amphibians and reptiles began in childhood and before he was through he had generated and analyzed a huge quantity of herpetological data (see Appendix 1), encouraged and inspired the research and careers of numerous biological investigators, and in his capacity as the longest serving Editor / Editor-in-Chief in this journal’s 140 year history, facilitated the publication of a vast amount of scientific literature (Catling *et al.* 2016).

While proud of his Maritimes roots, Francis spent most of his life in Ontario. Upon arriving in Ottawa at 15 years of age he immediately began to expand his

herpetological knowledge first through field experience and by connections with other naturalists in the local young naturalists’ club (Cook 2010a). A decade later he was appointed Curator of Herpetology, thus commencing a 60-year professional herpetological association with the Museum. He would hold that position until 1991. Subsequently he continued to work almost daily as a Researcher Emeritus / Research Associate for another decade and a half (Figure 1) until illness confined him to his rural heritage stone home in the country near Bishops Mills, ON. Francis died in Kemptville, ON on 3 January 2020 after a short period of hospitalization (OFNC Publications Committee 2019). His happy laugh and twinkling smile were with him to the end.

Early History and Family

Francis was born in Wolfville, Nova Scotia (NS) on 3 March 1935. His father, Thomas William Cook, was a Professor of Psychology and also worked at the Defence Research Board in Ottawa, ON. Thomas’ wife Dorothy (Cochrane) was a stay-at-home mother, looking after the home as well as son Francis, his brother Edmund Cochrane (Ned) Cook, and sister Florence Hazel (Smallman). The family moved considerably across Canada as required by Thomas’ academic and professional appointments, residing for periods in Wolfville, NS; then Toronto, ON; Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; Victoria, British Columbia; and, finally, Ottawa.

Francis’ curiosity in nature was piqued early (at age six!) when his brother, Ned hatched “a scoop of toad eggs” (Cook 2010a). He later visited the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto and was so intrigued by what he saw and by the encouragement of legendary herpetologist Shelley Logier, that he decided then and there—at age nine—to dedicate his career to studying reptiles and amphibians. In Ottawa as a teenager

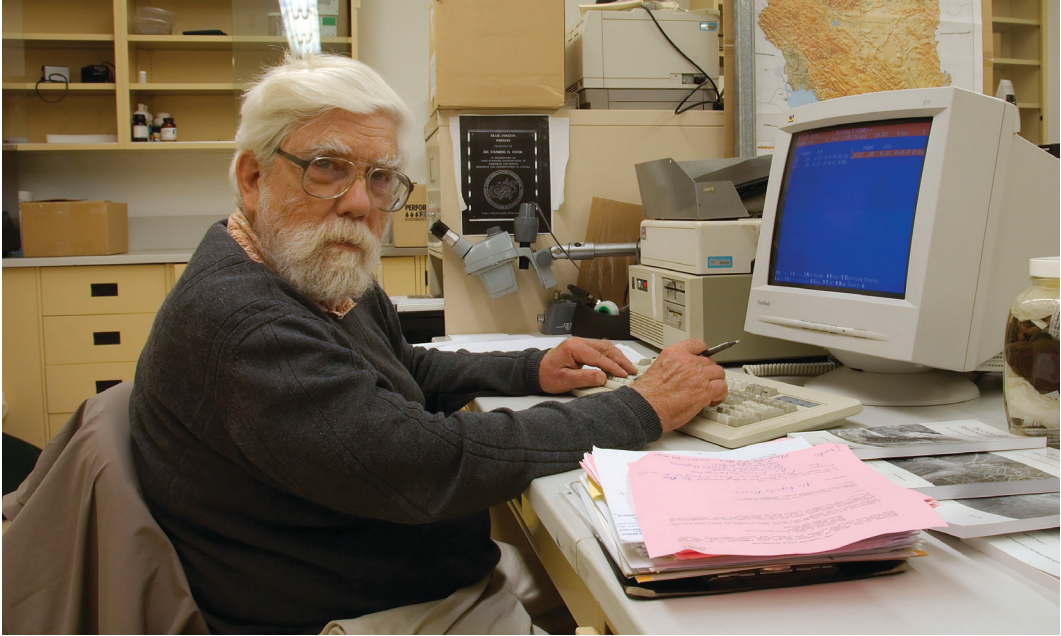


FIGURE 1. Francis Cook at his desk as Canadian Museum of Nature Emeritus Researcher, striking an atypically serious tone. Photo: Peter Frank, 11 September 2007, © Canadian Museum of Nature.

in 1950, he joined the Macoun Field Club (MFC), the junior naturalists' group co-sponsored by the Ottawa Field Naturalists' Club (OFNC) and the Museum, and soon became a volunteer leader. In later years as a Museum staff member he would serve as a leader of the program.

During an era when institutional facilities and their staff were substantially more publicly accessible than now, Francis also frequented the Museum herpetology section where he made a friend—and mentor—of fellow Nova Scotian, Dr. Sherman Bleakney. Francis assisted in Bleakney's research for several years, first as a volunteer and then as a summer field assistant. He then attended Acadia University (1955–1960), completing his B.Sc. in 1959, the same year that Bleakney moved from the Museum to Acadia University as well. Francis completed his M.Sc. there in 1960 under Bleakney's supervision, his thesis on the herptofauna of Prince Edward Island being based substantially on specimens they collected together. Ironically, considering their long history of joint field studies, research and collaboration (Figure 2), Bleakney died only two months before Francis (Bleakney 2020).

Francis married Joyce Crosby on 26 October 1962, an accomplished entomologist in her own right. In 1970 they purchased an old stone farmhouse south of Ottawa near Bishops Mills, ON, where the family (including son Thomas and daughter Wanda) lived in a quiet and beautifully wild setting.

Herpetological Research, Curation, and Teaching

Sherman Bleakney's return to Acadia University in 1958 had left the Museum without a staff herpetologist but Francis Cook was known to Museum personnel as an enthusiastic and knowledgeable—and unemployed—young man. When the offer was made in May 1960, he readily accepted the position as Curator of Herpetology. He held that post continuously thereafter except for a two-year educational leave in the late 1960s to do a Ph.D. (formally completed in 1978)



FIGURE 2. Francis Cook (far right) examining specimens in the field in eastern Ontario with Sherman Bleakney (left) and two unknown associates, August 1957. Photo: courtesy of Joyce Cook.

at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

The early focus of his research at the Museum stemmed from his Ph.D. work, addressing the biogeographic and taxonomic implications of the transition zone between eastern and prairie biota as expressed through morphological variations in the native toads, Eastern American Toad (*Anaxyrus americanus americanus*) and Canadian Toad (now *Anaxyrus hemiphrys*). A life-long advocate for properly collected and suitably curated specimens, he collected the majority of the more than 4000 study specimens from between the Rocky Mountains and the Atlantic Ocean.

From his earliest days at the Museum Francis actively encouraged and facilitated contributions to the herpetological specimen collection and provided advice and collecting materials to willing field naturalists (including D.F.B. and P.M.C.) to ensure specimen contributions were responsibly obtained and that they maximized their information potential. Herpetologist Fred Schueler, later a Research Associate at the Museum, responded most prolifically to this encouragement and donated thousands of specimens, particularly those of Northern Leopard Frog (*Lithobates pipiens*). As curator of the collection until 1991, Francis oversaw its growth from an initial 14 000 to 133 000 specimens. It became the largest assemblage of Canadian herpetological material anywhere in the world (Cook 2010a).

Francis' research was always substantially field oriented, such as surveys of species distributional gaps across Canada, life history investigations of rare or biogeographically significant species, and inventories of national parks. This is reflected in his publications. Of the ~50 articles and notes he produced in peer-reviewed journals and the ~30 published elsewhere (Cook 2010a; Seburn and Halliday 2018), most address distributional issues or provide life history information for particular Canadian species. He proposed no nomenclatural innovations, although taxonomic implications were discussed in his comprehensive toad studies (Cook 1983).

Certainly one of the best known and appreciated of his publications is *Introduction to Canadian Amphibians and Reptiles* (Cook 1984) which is still in wide use. He was working on an update of that book as recently as 2018 (Spears 2018). On a more local level, his *Amphibians and Reptiles of Ottawa* (Cook 1981) remains the definitive herpetological treatment for that area.

Since the early 1970s Francis and Joyce Cook also conducted herpetological (and entomological) monitoring studies in the woods and wetlands surrounding their rural home. These investigations include the marking and release of over 28000 amphibians and reptiles (Cook 2010a) in what surely must be one

of the most comprehensive, long-term herpetological monitoring projects ever conducted in Canada. Although unpublished, these herpetological data are preserved in Museum files and are potentially available for analysis and documentation by others.

Francis' formal career at the Museum ended abruptly in July 1993 when several dozen researchers were summarily "retired" in a highly controversial and widely denounced cost-cutting measure (Mackenzie 1993). Remarkably, despite his bitterness at this forced retirement, he continued his Museum research without interruption. In January 1994 he accepted the honorary title of Curator / Researcher Emeritus and continued his work at the Museum as a Research Associate until only a couple of years ago, making the long drive into the Museum from the Land O'Nod Road (the euphonically appropriate address of his country home) on an almost daily basis.

Both in his research and general conversation Francis demonstrated a quick wit, a competitive nature, and a refreshing direct, honest manner. He could be feisty, showing particularly limited patience for byzantine bureaucracy. For Francis, however, the bottom line was one's level of commitment to the study of nature. If you had a passion for the investigation and conservation of the natural world, he had all the time in the world for you, regardless of your formal status. And you needed 'all the time in the world' too, because the man could talk! Visits or telephone conversations with Francis (he was constantly taking calls; Figure 3) were fascinating, informative, challenging ... and never brief.

He was, simply put, inspirational and generous to a fault with his time and material. He and Joyce were amongst the longest serving members of the OFNC (over 60 years). Francis was a member of Council (the Board of Directors) from 1961 to 1966 and again from 1982 to 2011. He served one term as OFNC Vice-President (1965–1966) and was Chairman of the Macoun Field Club from 1961 to 1963. Such commitments cut into his professional productivity but he thought of this as a worthwhile contribution to Canadian natural sciences—and to naturalists. B.K., D.F.B., and P.M.C. are amongst the many, ranging from OFNC / MFC members and professional associates to citizens at large, who benefitted directly from his encouragement and aid. Many significant Canadian biological professionals would readily acknowledge the importance of Francis' mentorship in their early development.

Editorial Work

Francis was widely respected for his editorial work. Most of this involved CFN which he served in various capacities for 55 years. He was a member



FIGURE 3. A classic image of “the Snake Man” (as he was identified in the accompanying article), reptiles in one hand, phone in the other. The darker animal is a Northern Watersnake (*Nerodia sipedon*), the lighter one an Eastern Fox Snake (*Pantherophis gloydi*). Photo: scan of photo from Ottawa Citizen, 6 March 1987.

of the OFNC Publications Committee (CFN’s publisher) from 1962 to 1966, and again from 1981 to 2010, where his influence was substantial. Most significant, however, was his unequalled editorial contribution. He served as an Associate Editor with prime responsibility for herpetology from 1972 to 1981 and again, with prime responsibility for herpetology and tributes, from 2011 to 2016. He was Editor-in-Chief from 1962 to 1966 and again from 1981 to 2010, a length of service (34 years), unmatched by any other editor in the journal’s 140 year history (Brunton 1986; Cook 1986; Catling *et al.* 2016).

Francis was a careful and thoughtful editor who prided himself in helping struggling authors. He put ‘getting it right’ ahead of ‘getting it quickly’, to the frustration at times of associates and the journal’s administration. It also led to an amusing line in his obit-

uary from his son Thomas, however: “always a touch backlogged with his projects, Francis postponed publication of his obituary as long as he could before the accumulation of aging’s downsides finally overcame his constitution” (Anonymous 2020).

Productivity and statistics

Francis oversaw the publication of an astonishing 19275 pages in 35 volumes during his tenure as Editor/Editor-in-Chief of CFN. This does not account for additional editorial work such as annotation and revision of manuscripts that were submitted to the journal but ultimately not published. That duration and those statistics fall short of telling the whole story, however. Successful peer review in scientific journals substantially relies on the expertise and good judgement of the editor(s), who must ultimately decide if and when a paper is ready for publication. Francis combined his skills as a field biologist with a usually patient editorial disposition that maximized the outcome for many authors. Much time was spent helping authors conceptualize their ideas and communicate effectively. This and his exceptional diligence encouraged the development of a strong and committed editorial and production team that remained largely intact for decades. Francis had a particularly strong and productive relationship with CFN Business Manager W.J. (Bill) Cody. Bill pursued his work on behalf of the publication with a comparable level of diligence for over 50 years (Catling *et al.* 2010; Cook 2010b).

A guiding concept

Francis strongly believed in and advocated for an independent Canadian journal of natural history to serve naturalists, conservationists, and scientists. He believed it could only be supported in Canada by subscriptions from both lay naturalists and employed professionals. Neither group alone would be strong enough to finance and sustain the preparation and production of such a peer-reviewed journal. This idea, in keeping with the OFNC’s long-established mandate for encouraging and publishing original research by its members (Whyte 1880), has proven extremely successful over the years. On several occasions over the more than 135 years since the incorporation of the OFNC, bad times for the journal (e.g., World War I) were only survived with the support of the OFNC organization and bad times for the organization (e.g., the Great Depression) were only endured by national support through the journal (Brunton 2004).

Francis contributed to the protection of this inclusive concept with the *ad hoc* Publications Review Committee, appointed by the OFNC council. In 1980 and 1981 the committee reviewed and refined the editorial mandate and developed a policy to guide the proportion of scientific versus popular content in the

journal. This was not an easy nor an uncontroversial discussion. Although for diametrically opposite reasons, individuals at both extremes of the issue wanted to separate the journal from the OFNC (Smith 1981). After extensive consultation and debate, however, the unified philosophy prevailed, as indicated in the subsequent Publication Policy (Bedford 1983) which continues to frame and direct OFNC publications in the present. The success of this concept was due in substantial part to constructive input and a vigorous defence of that philosophy by Francis and other like-minded naturalists.

CFN as a tool for conservation

With the help of the federal Fisheries and Oceans Canada department (specifically, Robert Campbell; Renaud 2011) and personnel in the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS), Francis arranged for the publication of a large series of status reports on faunal species at risk commissioned by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). These included annual reports, updates and—most importantly—status reports on 89 fishes and 51 marine mammal species. In addition, CFN published status reports on one amphibian, two reptiles, two birds, two mammals, one invertebrate, and 12 vascular plant species. This not only provided a significant public outlet for these important conservation documents when none other was available, but the associated publication fees represented significant financial relief for the operational costs of the CFN. Although federal and provincial governments eventually took over the online publication of official status reports, the CFN initiative had satisfied an important national conservation need (Lepitzki 2017) and continues to publish papers resulting from field work conducted during COSEWIC status report preparation (e.g., Ovaska *et al.* 2019).

Francis' conservation efforts also extended to his long-time (1981 to 1994) chairmanship of the COSEWIC Amphibian and Reptiles Subcommittee, and acting as Scientific Advisor from 1975 to 1994 on policy and regulation development for the Canadian representatives to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

Special issues

Themed issues exploring a particularly large and important topic area have been a part of CFN for many years, the first biological example being a catalogue of Saskatchewan birds published almost a century ago (Mitchell 1924). Francis promoted such comprehensive contributions more aggressively than any editor before him, resulting in some remarkable issues that not only contribute to the overall richness of the journal but are important as stand-alone publications. The

first of these, “Peregrene <sic> Falcons in the 1980s” (CFN 104[2] 1990 <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/34346719>), represented the work of a number of contributors updating a continental assessment of this species at risk that had been published a decade earlier. A diversity of special issues subjects followed, including a valuable history of botanical exploration in Canada (Pringle 1995), the definitive biography of eminent Canadian ornithologist Percy A. Taverner (Cranmer-Byng 1996), the detailed description of orchid species in the Ottawa District of ON and QC (Reddoch and Reddoch 1997), and a comprehensive history of the CWS (Burnett 1999). Francis prepared a postscript for the latter, addressing the close working relationship between CFN and the CWS and pointing out that two of his predecessors as CFN editors were CWS scientists (Cook 1999).

Awards

Francis was sensitive and thoughtful in handling reptiles and amphibians, and a very supportive member of the Canadian Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Society. In 1991 he was the first recipient of the society's Distinguished Canadian Herpetologist Award (later renamed the R.W. Rankin Award) for his dedicated and long-term service.

Other career achievement recognition came with his receipt of the Alliance of Canadian Natural History Museum's first Gold Leaf Award (subsequently, the Naylor Award) in 2007 for “exceptional contribution to museum-based natural history in Canada” (Cook 2010a: 10). That was followed by the first Blue Racer Award by the Canadian Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Network in 2001 “in recognition of long standing contributions to amphibian and reptile research and conservation in Canada” (Canadian Herpetological Society 2020).

Honorary Membership of the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club was conferred on Francis in 1998 for his contributions to herpetology, conservation, and especially for his editorial contributions to CFN (Darbyshire 1999). He received the OFNC Member of the Year Award in 1990 for his efforts in re-establishing the journal's intended publication schedule (Gummer 1991) and again in 2010 in recognition of his overall contributions to CFN. Part of the latter citation reads “he has maintained the CFN as the most scientifically important and visible aspect of the Club” (Allison *et al.* 2011: 184). He was indirectly responsible for the OFNC receiving the Richardson Natural History Education Award Trophy (for special contributions to natural history education) from Ontario Nature (formerly, Federation of Ontario Naturalists) in 1996 in recognition of the long-term contribution

and continuing success of CFN (Pope 1997; Catling *et al.* 2010).

The production of two CFN Special Issues (132[1] <https://doi.org/10.22621/cfn.v132i1.2140> and 132[2] <https://doi.org/10.22621/cfn.v132i2.2167>) in 2018 represented only the second time an issue of the journal (let alone two) had been dedicated to an individual (Figure 4). The only previous example was the memorial issue dedicated to OFNC founder (and CFN-predecessor editor) James Fletcher published over a century earlier (in 1909; *Ottawa Naturalist* 22[10] <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/5506754>).

In 2018 after a lifetime of distinguished service to Canadians and Canada, Francis was admitted as a Member to the Order of Canada (Figure 5). The citation (Governor General of Canada 2018) notes his contributions as a scientist, his success in the publication of vast amounts of biological information, and his effective communication of an appreciation of amphibians and reptiles to Canadians at large. What a fitting exclamation point for a remarkable and life-long editor!

Always a Naturalist

Yes, Francis was a scientist but first and foremost, he was a classic field naturalist. To the end of his days he remained interested in promoting the publication of observational natural history investigation of all kinds and by all kinds of authors. Non-institutional contributors were welcome and, under his guidance, many independent and institutional researchers alike published the first of what would be a lifetime of scientific contributions in CFN. That noble achievement is perhaps his most greatly appreciated legacy. Of course, he will also be remembered as that surreal figure with twinkling eyes, a loud voice, and a quick wit.

Acknowledgements

We very much appreciate the help of Joyce Cook in providing information and illustrations for this tribute. In addition, the helpful suggestions by Francis' friend and Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club publications associate E. Franklin Pope, are greatly appreciated. The comparably valuable input and perspective from long time Canadian Museum of Nature associate I.M. (Ernie) Brodo was also much appreciated. Similarly, we thank the Museum's Chantel Dussault and Christine Jenness for arranging access to and use of the Figure 1 image.

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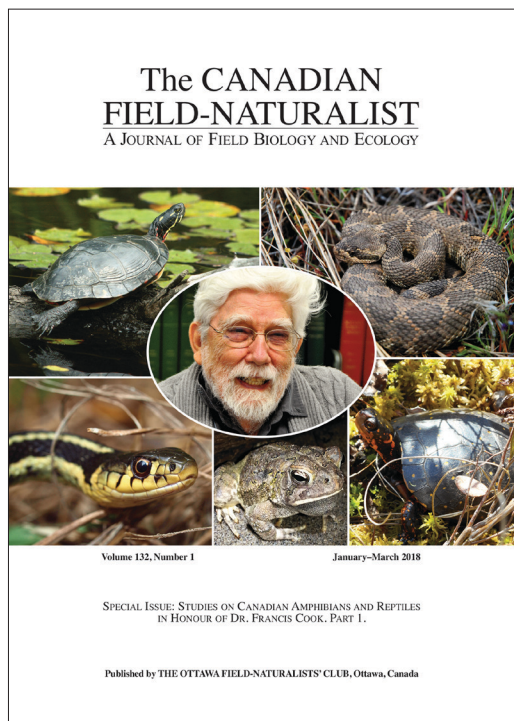


FIGURE 4. Cover of the Special Issue: Studies on Canadian Amphibians and Reptiles in Honour of Dr. Francis Cook, Part 1.

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FIGURE 5. Francis Cook at the award ceremony of the Order of Canada at Rideau Hall on 1 February 2019 with Governor General Julie Payette (standing right). Photo: Sgt. Johanie Maheu, Rideau Hall © OSGG, 2019.

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APPENDIX 1. Francis Cook publications.

A bibliography of the publications by Francis Cook was recently produced in this journal by Seburn and Halliday (2018) and thus is not repeated here. Amongst the titles they listed are all of Francis' publications in peer reviewed journals as well as herpetological publications in non-peer reviewed publications such as local naturalist club periodicals. These 101 titles may be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.22621/cfn.v132i2.2169>.

The following lists Francis Cook's 171 miscellaneous publications (thematically, in chronological order) which contain original information and are not included in Seburn and Halliday (2018). Francis also produced 32 annual Editor's Reports commencing with Cook (1982), each summarizing the journal's statistics for the proceeding volume. Those 'house-keeping' reports are not listed here.

This bibliography is presented in four subsections: listed first are abstracts, tributes, and historical publications, followed by important file reports, then book reviews in herpetology, and finally, other book reviews.

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