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OBITUARY

Philippe LEBRUN (1938-2015)
The last lesson

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Water insects were crawling or swimming at the ‘zoete waters’, a pond near Leuven, where a young teacher organized practical exercises for the students in zoology. It was my first direct contact with Philippe Lebrun, the beginning of a long story.

His father, Jean Lebrun, was teaching botany at the same university located in Leuven (UCL). Philippe Lebrun was already used to collecting Carabidae near Brussels. However, to study mites, these minute animals (“de petite taille” to quote the title of his first acarological publication), in the Meerdal forest was another story. Systematics was in such condition as to make them terra incognita to him. In 1968, after several publications on soil mites, he submitted his D.Sc. thesis at UCL under Prof. H. Debauche, the founder of the animal ecology unit. His thesis was a continuation of previous work and focused especially on oribatid mites, a fascinating group whose diversity and function were poorly understood at that time. Results: 203 pages published, 1,025,027 arthropod specimens collected, 125 oribatid species identified, diversity linked to vegetation (forest, meadow, plantation), etc.

Adept of the open door policy, Ph. Lebrun had his desk covered with stacks of books and reports to read. He was, by nature, a ‘social animal’ and a man who knew how to surround himself with promising students, the so-called ‘Belgian school of acarology’ (Fig. 1). Most of them conducted original research and wrote a thesis under his supervision. The first student was Georges Wauthy. Due to a chronic lack of space at the university, Georges shared Philippe’s office in Leuven. He specialized in Oribatida (in the traditional sense) and worked on various forest soils. The title of his D.Sc. thesis submitted in 1979...
was the "Synécologie de taxocénoses d’oribates du sol de quelques forêts décidues de Belgique". Their collaboration lead to the study of land use practices and a review of Belgian oribatid species.

The other Georges [Van Impe], GVI within the lab, specialized in spider mites and illustrated the opening-up to agricultural acarology. He completed and defended his D.Sc. thesis in 1985 with the title "Contribution à la conception de stratégies de contrôles de l’acarien tisserand commun, Tetranychus urticae Koch (Acari : Tetranychidae)". Many publications of Ph. Lebrun were devoted to plant-inhabiting mites observed on different plants and in different countries and revealed his interest in agricultural acarology. Later, their collaboration will give rise to the study of ticks and Lyme disease.

Air pollution, its effects and the identification of biological indicators, constituted another research axis developed by Ph. Lebrun, subjects already explored by J. De Sloover who was studying lichens in the neighbouring unit (plant ecology). Early publications showed Philippe’s enthusiasm for toxicology of oribatid mites, his concern for the consequences of pollution and culminated in his review with N. van Straalen published in 1996.

Last, but not least, Danielle Gridelet (later D. de Saint-Georges-Gridelet) carried out her thesis on dust mites. Her D.Sc. dissertation, submitted in 1981, was entitled the "Biocologie et stratégie de contrôle de l’Acarien des poussières domestiques Dermatophagoides pteronyssinus (Trouessart, 1897)". Danielle and Philippe’s collaboration on dust mites led in 1984 to a U.S. Patent document entitled "Process for combating and/or preventing allergic diseases employing natamycin".

In the meantime, in 1974, the faculty of biology moved from Leuven, Louvain-l’Ancienne, to Louvain-la-Neuve. This did not prevent Philippe from organizing the first European Course of Acarology initiated by the Société des Acarologues de Langue française (SALF). This course was held in Louvain-la-Neuve in July 1974. In addition to myself, the young researchers who followed the courses were (in part) F. Athias, M. Baillod, A. Bellido, M. Bertrand, J.-L. Camicas, R. Covarrubias, W. Matthey, R. Migolet, Cl. Pérez, D. de Saint-Georges-Gridelet, G. Wauthy. The teachers included some famous European acarologists: L. van der Hammen, J. Travé, Y. Coineau, A. Aeschlimann, R. Legendre, C. Bader, Cl. Athias-Henriot, P. Morel, R. Schuster, J. Cooreman, A. Fain, J. Gutierrez, G. Mathys and ... Ph. Lebrun who taught soil acarology.

Soil ecology was thus one of his main concerns. In 1982, again in Louvain-la-Neuve, he organized the VIII International Colloquium of Soil Zoology with over 200 participants from 39 countries, 56 oral presentations and over 80 posters. A colloquium where he was surrounded by his usual team (Colette Wibo studying soil Collembola must be included), and ending up with the publication in 1983 of a voluminous and reputable proceedings (709 pages). The first symposium of the European Association of Acarologists (EURAAC) held in Graz in August 1988 offered anew the opportunity to bring the team together and to present their research on life strategies in mites.

In 1998, from 3 to 10 September, he organized – again for the SIALF (formerly SALF) – the 11th international course in acarology, French version. This time, it was held in Matagne-la-Petite (at the 'Centre de Colloques et de Séminaires' of UCL) and devoted to plant-inhabiting mites. The organizing committee included some students of the first edition: H. M. André, D. de Saint-Georges-Gridelet, G. Van Impe and G. Wauthy.

In addition to the Belgian team, there was also an intense international activity in the lab, even in acarology (e.g., J. S. Kennedy from India, H. Vera Ziegler from Uruguay or M.-I. Noti from D. R. Congo). In many cases, this led to a D.Sc. thesis. Ph. Lebrun international activities also included serving on the editorial or advisory boards of prestigious journals, for instance Pedobiologia, or the International Journal of Acarology. Opportunities for him to put into practice the "substantificque mouelle", the Rabelais’ famous metaphor dear to his heart. Ph. Lebrun was also an international authority in the domain of soil ecology, he was the last author in the reply to Nature published in 2001.

The dinosaur – his pseudonym, a dinosaur figurine ornamented his office door – continued his
many activities after retirement in 2004. For instance, he shared his passion for soil mites with Ruben Werquin, a future "Bachelier en agronomie", encouraged Julien N’Dri from Ivory Coast to complete and defend a D.Sc. thesis and composed the preface to the "Bréviaire de taxonomie des acariens" published by Abc taxa.

Recently, I was reading the book on parasites by P.-J. Van Beneden, also a professor at UCL. The identity of the mite living on bees was not clear to me. "Bees, which give us their wax and their honey in exchange for the shelter which we afford them, have a mortal enemy, an acarus, which attaches itself to them, not in order to gain any advantage from them, but to cause their death. It is not so much a parasite as an assassin, and we may be excused from describing it." (Van Beneden, P.-J. 1887. Animal Parasites and Messmates. D. Appleton & Co., New York, p. 136, first published in French in 1875 under the title "Les commensaux et les parasites"). Therefore, I sent a mail to Ph. Lebrun, it was less than a month before his death. The reply came the same day: "Acarapis woodi ?" Probably not. A. woodi was described 45 years later, in 1921. The message continued: "Non je ne vais pas bien : pneumonie suivie de pleurésie et maintenant de phlébite ! Sinon, à part cela, tout va bien et je suis épaté de ton activité !". Beyond that, everything goes well. A last lesson. *La vie continue*. Life goes on!

Figure 1: Ph. Lebrun and his local team of acarology. Standing from left to right: Henri M. André, Georges Van Impe, Alex Dewez and Danielle Gridelet. Front row kneeling from left to right: Philippe Lebrun, Horacio Vera Ziegler and Georges Wauthy. Photo by Émile Jal, probably in May 1975.
André H.M.

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Ph. Lebrun published on a lot of subjects related to ecology (biological control, ecotoxicology, bioindicators, protection of environment...) and dealt with many animals (birds, frogs, Odonadoptera, Lepidoptera, Coleoptera...). Only publications on the soil fauna and acarological works are listed here.


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