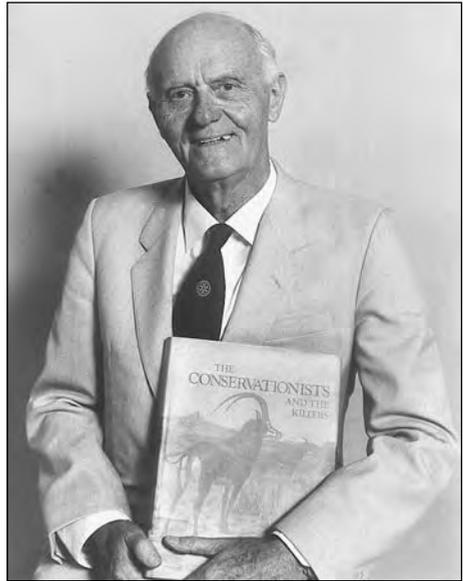


## John Adams Pringle (1910–2002)

Dr John Pringle, a former director of the Natal Museum in Pietermaritzburg, died on 4 July 2002, in his 92nd year. He was born in Warrenton near Kimberley, but grew up on a farm near Lake Chrissie in the Carolina district of Mpumalanga. He had an active outdoor life there, where his interest in wildlife began. After schooling in Carolina, he attended the University of the Witwatersrand, majoring in Zoology and Botany. In 1935 he was awarded the M.Sc. degree for his thesis on the remarkable life history of a minute beetle called *Micromalthus debilis* which was breeding in pit props in the local gold mines. His thesis was published in the Transactions of the *Royal Entomological Society of London* in 1935, and is still cited in scientific writings. His doctorate came in 1954, and dealt with aspects of snake embryology.



John Pringle  
(Photograph: The Natal Witness)

Dr Pringle's mother had a notable career in the Kimberley Museum before her marriage, so perhaps it was not surprising that his first appointment was as an Assistant at the Port Elizabeth Museum. At that time, the museum was directed by Dr F.W. FitzSimons, the authority on South African snakes and their venoms, who founded the famous Snake Park in the grounds of the museum. Dr FitzSimons had also built a large enclosure for live seals, but this caused problems. In those days the museum was located in a prime residential part of the city, and the noise made by the seals so disturbed neighbours that they took the matter to court. The museum lost the case and had to dispose of the seals. Dr FitzSimons was offended and abruptly resigned. Despite John Pringle's limited experience, he was soon appointed Director and was launched on his long career in museology.

During the Second World War, Dr Pringle expanded the programme of collecting snake venoms for serum production that had been instituted by Dr FitzSimons. This was considered by the Government to be important because of possible exposure of South African troops to snake bites in the war theatres of North Africa. To ensure a constant supply of the venoms, he built up a network of snake catchers in the farming community.

Many different biological specimens were collected for scientific study. Dr Pringle encouraged local trawlermen to keep anything unusual brought up in their nets, and this resulted in a spectacular new species of seashell being named *Afrivoluta pringlei*. Fishes were also obtained for Professor J.L.B. Smith, then preparing the first edition of his book on the seafishes of Southern Africa, who named the species *Palinurichthys pringlei* in his honour. A distinctive new subspecies of the African Spitting Cobra was

discovered and later described and named by Dr Pringle, and also a new species of fossil Cretaceous mollusc.

Another notable event was the successful defence he organised of the Addo Elephant Park, in the face of agitation by farmers to have it deproclaimed. Then there was the visit to the Snake Park by the British Royal Family during the Royal Tour of 1947. This was widely reported by the media, and the *London Illustrated News* published a large centre-page photograph showing Dr Pringle earnestly telling the King and Queen about the different live snakes held up for their inspection, while the clearly horrified Princesses looked on.

After 16 years in Port Elizabeth, Dr Pringle was appointed Director of the Natal Museum, and he arrived with his family in Pietermaritzburg in mid-1953. Although a national museum, it was understaffed and underfunded. Gradually he was able to enlarge the staff, and he planned new developments, especially after an inspiring visit to American museums funded by a Carnegie Grant. But there was limited space for growth, and modern laboratories, workshops and library accommodation were badly needed. Through his persistence in negotiations with obdurate State Departments, a large extension to the building eventually was approved, and was completed in 1967. This transformed the institution.

Dr Pringle embarked on an extensive programme of collecting items relating to the 19th century settlers in Natal. His most remarkable acquisition was all of the surviving furniture and domestic articles that had been in use in Government House while successive Governors of Natal had been in residence up to 1910. Old farming implements and vehicles were also collected. As a result, it was possible for the technical staff of the museum to create the much acclaimed History Hall. While all this went on, Dr Pringle undertook a survey of the small mammals of Natal, and built up a significant collection of over 2 000 specimens, on which he based two publications in the *Annals of the Natal Museum*. It is now housed in the Durban Natural Science Museum, and has been named *The Pringle Collection*. During those years, Dr Pringle also was active in the Southern African Museums Association, of which he was a founder-member; he served often on its Council and for a term as President. On his retirement, he was elected as an Honorary Life Member.

Having a deep concern for nature conservation, Dr Pringle was a longtime member of the Wildlife Society of Southern Africa, and was instrumental in establishing branches in Port Elizabeth and Pietermaritzburg. He served as National President for two years, and assembled the archives of the Society. For seven years he worked on the manuscript of his most important book, *The Conservationists and the Killers*, which was a history of wildlife protection in South Africa.

Always interested in historical matters, Dr Pringle wrote a history of St John's Presbyterian Church in Pietermaritzburg, and shared authorship of a book on the short-lived Vryheid Republic with the Archivist Dr Basil Leverton. Being descended from 1820 Settler stock in the Eastern Cape, he maintained contact with Pringle families farming in the Bedford district, and was co-author of a family history called *Pringles of the Valley*. He even succeeded in arranging the transfer of the mortal remains of the renowned 19th century poet and journalist Thomas Pringle from Britain, to be reinterred during 1970 in a chapel on a family farm Eildon near Bedford.

Shortly after his arrival in Pietermaritzburg, Dr Pringle joined the local Rotary Club and soon became its Secretary. Later he served a term as President, and he wrote a history of the club. For his services over many years, he was admitted to the Paul Harris Fellowship, Rotary's highest honour.

John Pringle was gregarious, warmly hospitable, a relaxed public speaker, and well known in the city. Being rather tall, erect, and favouring formal clothing, he was a distinctive figure. He had an abiding concern for the welfare of his staff, and took pride and pleasure in their achievements. He was married, first to Alma who predeceased him in 1984, then to Ingrid, widow of Dr Ashton Tarr, a former Mayor of Pietermaritzburg. They moved to Amberfield in Howick, where, never inactive, he began a study of the endangered Hilton Daisy. His richly productive life closed after a short illness. He left his wife, two children, three step-children, six grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren.

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