

The [FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology](#)

[Sir Percy FitzPatrick](#) (1862-1931 - better known as 'Fitz') was a politician, mining financier and pioneer of the fruit industry, perhaps best known for writing the classic children's book, *Jock of the Bushveld*. During some of his hunting trips, Fitz caught wild animals which he kept at Zoo Lake and which formed the first stock of the Johannesburg Zoo. He also played a key role in starting the citrus industry in the Sunday's River Valley. Fitz's most historically significant roles were as a historian, politician and as an architect of the Union of South Africa, resulting in his knighthood. Fitz was Irish by heritage and South African by birth and upbringing. He is famous for saying: "I want nothing for parties, for individuals or for provinces, just something that will assure fair play and equal rights, and peace for South Africa". He lost his eldest son in the First World War and initiated the two minute silence observed on Armistice Day.

The Fitztitute's creator

Fitz's daughter, [Dr Cecily Kathleen Niven](#) (1899-1992), was a feminist before there was a formal feminist movement. In the 1950s, in the early days of Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism, she virtually single-handedly created the Fitztitute (largely responsible for the University of Cape Town being the [3rd](#) ranked university for avian biology in the world) and the [Pan African Ornithological Congresses](#). Cecily's two 'babies' developed and continue to promote Africa-wide ornithological and conservation-related education and research.

Early days

The Fitztitute was created in 1960 as a Section 21 "non-profitmaking-company" housed at the University of Cape Town and controlled by a Board comprising nominees of the Percy FitzPatrick Trust, the South African Ornithological Society, UCT and elected representatives of major funders. Beyond the Director presenting a few lectures a year, the Fitztitute was an autonomous entity with no formal academic involvement with UCT. The Fitztitute was housed in the 'penthouse' of the then Department of Zoology at the University of Cape Town with Hon. Prof. John 'Jack' Winterbottom (a retired British colonial servant) as its first director in September 1960.

During its first 12 years, the Fitztitute was the epitome of a colonial institution. Although it was Afrocentric in that it conducted research on African birds, it did so by implementing European biological theories, and primarily within a descriptive context relating to the ecological and historical distribution of the southern African birds, and generating life-history studies of numerous species. Its only 'students' were post-grads supervised by Zoology's Prof. Gerry Broekhuysen.

In 1972, Winterbottom was succeeded as director by the Fitztitute research officer Dr Roy Siegfried.

1972 - a year of transition

Even before assuming the Fitztitute director's post, Siegfried learned of the Fitztitute's precarious financial situation. When he discussed the matter with Dr Niven (Fitztitute Board Chairperson) and other representatives of the Percy FitzPatrick Trust [especially Clive Corder, uncle of current UCT law Professor Hugh Corder], matters were brought to a head. Corder was an administrator of the Niven family's finances generally, as well as those of the Trust. He was also, at the time, chairman of UCT's Council. Corder pragmatically indicated that the Fitztitute's past financial situation might be improved if the Fitztitute became formally incorporated within UCT.

The negotiations leading up to the 1972 agreement were protracted, complicated and fraught with challenges. Initially, UCT Vice Chancellor Sir Richard Luyt discouraged incorporation based on financial concerns. Head of Zoology, Prof. John Day resisted because he did not see the Fitztitute as an academic asset. In fact, negotiations were threatened with derailment on several occasions. Their

ultimate success, however, was engineered by the foresight, wisdom and flair of Prof. J.S. 'Jack' de Wet (1913-1995), then Dean of the Faculty of Science. The 'deal was done' and confirmed by UCT's Council on 5 July 1972.

The Fitztitute 'melds' with UCT

From then onwards, the Fitztitute was incorporated into the University of Cape Town's academic and administrative structures as a sub-department of its Department of Zoology. Its Board of Control was transformed into an Advisory Committee, with no executive authority and its membership comprising representatives of the University of Cape Town and co-opted members who were to be experts in science and its effective administration. By 1976, the Advisory Committee gained a representative of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, and Fitztitute staff qualified for national research funding grants.

The director, under this new dispensation, ceased to be an 'honorary professor' and took on the more formal status of Associate Professor. Roy and then junior lecturer Tim Crowe participated actively in Zoology's under- and post-graduate educational activities. Roy supervised many successful post-graduate students, including Tim Crowe, Phil Hockey – director of the Fitztitute from 2008 to 2012 – and current director Peter Ryan.

Siegfried also introduced and implemented a new mission statement for the Fitztitute:

To conduct empirical, scientific research on African birds that advances locally relevant theory on them as functional components of African ecosystems.

Of critical importance was the strategic change to require all research to be hypothetico-deductive in nature and be competitive internationally for consideration by prestigious, discipline- (not bird-) oriented, peer-reviewed journals. In short, the Fitztitute aspired to be *both* Afrocentric and internationally excellent, both in its research and educational activities.

Making the most of Cooperative Scientific Programmes

Roy Siegfried was extremely adept at science politics, and was closely involved in shaping the national agenda for environmental research in the late 1970s and 1980s through the Foundation for Research Development (predecessor of the National Research Foundation). As a result, he was able to closely align the Fitztitute's research focus with national research goals (and vice versa!), to the benefit of the institute. During the heyday of the FRD's Cooperative Scientific Programmes, the Fitz employed a series of researchers, each leading a well-funded research programme linked to specific biomes, such as Peter and Sue Frost (Savanna Biome Programme), Dr David Duffy (Benguela Ecology Programme), John Cooper (Antarctica and Southern Oceans Programme), Drs Sue Milton and Richard Dean (Karoo Biome Programme), and Dr Ian Macdonald (Invasive Species Programme).

This expansion saw the Fitz outgrow its eyrie atop the Harold Pearson Building (current home of the Plant Conservation Unit). Additional office space was obtained at the north end of the PD Hahn Building, which accommodated the seabird team as well as the bird ringing unit, SAFRING. The 'main' Fitz moved to its current location when the former Psychology Department was extensively remodelled to form the current John Day Building¹.

¹ The initial plan was for the Fitz to occupy the northern part of the John Day Building that used to house the Bolus Herbarium, but Siegfried fought this, fearing contamination from preservatives used in the herbarium.

Revisiting the Fitztute's mission statement

In February 1985, the Fitztute's 25th year of existence, under the moderation of Board Member and Assessor Dr Alan Kemp (Transvaal Museum), Fitztute staff and students met at a 'retreat' to review the existing, and consider a new, Mission. Key recommendations emanating from this meeting were:

1. *other biologists who can contribute to the development of Africa.*
2. development of [UCT's Avian \(now Animal\) Demographic Unit](#), which pioneered large-scale citizen science in southern Africa. (SAFRING and the management of the ADU databases were incorporated back into the Fitz in 2018.)
3. making a concerted effort to recruit outstanding 'black' students, locally and from elsewhere in Africa.

Perhaps the most significant, indeed pivotal, strategic development of this review process was to adapt the Fitztute's Mission Statement from focusing on birds as functional components of ecosystems to:

To promote and undertake scientific studies involving birds, that contribute significantly to a better understanding of the theory and practice affecting the maintenance of biological diversity and the sustained use of biological resources.

As a caveat to this, it was also strongly emphasized that this new mission would not compromise the commitment to scientific excellence or prevent staff and students from conducting curiosity-driven research, even on non-avian taxa, which may not fall under its ambit.

This decision had profound effects on the Fitztute's development as an Afrocentric research centre. In a real sense, the Fitztute anticipated (and carefully planned for and constructively implemented) its transformation to adopt the new, inclusive science [conservation biology](#), while still retaining a strong focus on birds.

The CB 'Course'

Siegfried, Tim Crowe and Ian Macdonald – another of Roy's PhD students who went on to become CEO of WWF South Africa – designed the Fitztute's Postgraduate Programme in Conservation Biology during 1990-1991. In January 1992, the first class of nine CB students together with two desk-top computers were crunched into the single office opposite the men's rest room on the southern end of Level 2 of the John Day Building. The course was not without its teething problems. In the first year, Ian Macdonald injured his back, and ended up teaching his module on invasive species from his bed. However, it was sufficiently successful for Tim and Roy to lobby the Science Faculty to advertise a lecturer position for an academic coordinator for the course, to which Peter Ryan was appointed in April 1993. Additional space was then sourced on the top floor of the New Science Lecture Theatre, where the CB class still resides.

The post-Siegfried transition

By 1989, a survey commissioned by the South African Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, ranked Ornithology as South Africa's top research discipline (fourth in the world – just behind Canada). Following Roy Siegfried's retirement in 1995, another former Fitz PhD student, Morné du Plessis, took over as director of the Fitztute. Much of his energy was initially spent fending off pressure from the UCT establishment to collapse the Institute into a research unit within the Department of Zoology. This

culminated in a new contract between the University and the Percy FitzPatrick Memorial Trust in 2001, which ensured the continued existence of the Institute.

During the late 1990s, the CB Course was awarded a large grant from the John T. and Catherine D. MacArthur Foundation to support the education and research of students from African countries to the North. The 22nd International Ornithological Congress (IOC) was held in Durban, fulfilling one of Cecily Niven's long-term ambitions to host the meeting in Africa. Aldo Berruti, a former Fitz MSc student, was the IOC Secretary General. Tim Crowe also was successful in securing the promise of the Pola Pasvolsky Research Chair in Conservation Biology, although this would only come to fruition after the donor's death. Research capacity in systematics was enhanced by a generous bequest from Dr Phillip Clancey after his death in 2001.

The FitzPatrick Institute Centre of Excellence

In 2004, the Fitztitute was selected as one of the first six South African Centres of Excellence (CoE) by the South African Department of Science and Technology and National Research Foundation. Initially only half-funded, the CoE formed a network of ornithological researchers based at UCT, and the Universities of Pretoria and Berkeley. Their mandate was to use birds as keys to biodiversity conservation, with two main research themes: understanding biodiversity (mainly comprising phylogenetics, biogeography and behavioural ecology) and maintaining biodiversity (applied research to improve the conservation status of African birds and their habitats). Another former Fitz PhD student, Penn Lloyd was appointed as CoE manager. Supplemental funds from the CoE also allowed the Pola Pasvolsky Research Chair to be filled, with Graeme Cumming appointed to the position.

In 2007, Morné du Plessis was lured away to become the CEO of WWF South Africa. He was replaced as director by Phil Hockey, a long-time Fitz academic who had recently completed leading the revision of *Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa* as a fully-referenced handbook. Penn Lloyd emigrated to Australia, and was replaced as CoE manager in 2009 by Dr Rob Little, yet another former Fitz PhD graduate, who moved back from his position as Director of Conservation at WWF-SA. The first CoE performance review resulted in up-grading to fully-funded status in 2010, and taking on partners at Nelson Mandela University. This was also the year that the Institute celebrated its 50th Anniversary.

Sadly, Phil Hockey died in early 2013, following a battle with cancer. During his all-too brief tenure as director, Phil was instrumental in setting up the 'hot birds' research programme, to predict the impacts of global warming on desert birds. Peter Ryan became acting director during Phil's illness, and subsequently was appointed as director in 2014.

Of the current academic staff, Dr Arjun Amar was appointed as a senior lecturer in 2010 to fill the vacancy when Phil Hockey became director. He was promoted *ad hominem* to Associate Professor in 2017. Dr Robert Thomson was appointed as a senior lecturer after Tim Crowe's retirement in 2013. When Peter Ryan took on the directorship, the position of academic coordinator for the CB course was lost, but Fitz post-doc Susie Cunningham was appointed as lecturer to take up this responsibility, as well as continue running the UCT-leg of the hot birds programme (together with Prof. Andrew McKechnie from the University of Pretoria). Finally, Prof. Claire Spottiswoode took over the Pola Pasvolsky Chair of Conservation Biology in 2016, following Prof. Graeme Cumming's move to Australia.

To date, Fitztitute researchers have published nearly 8000 peer-reviewed scientific and public intellectual papers and books. More than 80% of its nearly 500 MSc, PhD and post-doctoral students have found relevant employment at, and have become leaders within, scores of academic/public/private conservation and research organizations. In terms of government-required demographics, 21% of these graduands have been 'black' and 52% female. In all, they hail from 46 countries, of which 23 are in Africa.

Emeritus Professor Tim Crowe and Professor Peter Ryan