

**RONALD IAN CURRIE**  
**CBE, BSc(Glas), FIBiol**



The scientific career of Ron Currie, who died in Oban on 19 February 1996 at the age of 67, reflects the development of marine science over the past half-century. On the one hand, the very scale of the oceans makes extensive observations essential to a fundamental scientific understanding, and oceanography is multidisciplinary and international as a consequence. On the other hand, particular systems and processes have to be studied at specific localities suited to the task in hand. Ron played a major role in developing both these approaches and combining the results to produce a balanced view.

Ron Currie was born in Paisley on 10 October 1928. After his schooldays at Paisley, Ron read zoology at Glasgow University and graduated in 1949 with First Class Honours. He spent some time at the University of Copenhagen, then joined the Royal Naval Scientific Service and was seconded to the National Institute of Oceanography (NIO) at Wormley in Surrey.

This was a time of growth and structural change for government-supported science in which Ron became increasingly involved at the same time as his own research prospered. He successfully led numerous cruises to the Atlantic, the Antarctic, and the Indian Ocean: the weather and the ship, the instruments, the sampling and the scientists, could all be quite unpredictable, but he managed all save the weather -and I suppose the captain would say the ship too -with confidence and humour.

Scientifically, he was one of the first to recognise the importance of process studies alongside analysis of samples taken in more traditional manner. He was instrumental in developing Steeman-Nielsen's 14-carbon technique to measure primary productivity on oceanographic cruises, and he experimented with acoustics and underwater lights to observe and manipulate the deep scattering layer of plankton in the open ocean.

Ron's cruises to the Southern Hemisphere produced more than scientific results. On his way to the Antarctic on board RRS William Scoresby or RRS Discovery, he spent time ashore at the Simonstown Naval Base. It was here that he met Celia whose nursing career had taken her from London to South Africa and who had been invited to play tennis with some lonely sailors. That was the start of their lifelong partnership. They married in 1956, after her return to her native Guernsey, and in due course enjoyed family life together with their son, Crawford, and their daughter, Sue.

Ron's research and the administrative responsibility that he had assumed as Head of Biology at NIO laid the foundation for the leading role that he played in international marine science for over twenty years. Marine scientists around the world remember with appreciation his vigorous debate at international meetings, in particular at the Scientific Committee on Oceanic Research, which he served as Secretary from 1972 to 1978. Before that he had served as Secretary and then as President of the International Association of Biological Oceanography, which he had been instrumental in founding in 1964. Ron showed that such organisations had an important role to play in co-ordinating the large international programmes that were then developing to tackle global problems. Ron was intensely involved in national marine science as well: among his many activities, he was Secretary of the Challenger Society for Marine Science for a remarkable 32 years. He was elected FRSE in 1969.

In 1966 Ron returned to Scotland as Director of the Scottish Marine Biological Association (SMBA), now the Scottish Association for Marine Science, a post that he held for 22 years. The decision had been taken by the SMBA Council, under its President, Sir Maurice Yonge, Ron's former professor at Glasgow, to move the Laboratory from Millport in the Firth of Clyde to the west coast near Oban. Sir Maurice and Ron made an effective partnership and it naturally fell to Ron to implement the move, which was successfully completed by 1970. The designs of the Dunstaffnage Laboratory and of the research vessels, 'Challenger' and 'Calanus', with which he was also closely involved, show great foresight and versatility; they meet the needs of science today as well as they did when they were built.

With the move of the SMBA to Dunstaffnage came considerable expansion. New staff were appointed with whom Ron built a research programme that exploited to the full the opportunities presented by a location that had ready access to environments ranging from sea-lochs deeply embedded in the coast, across the continental shelf, to the open ocean. Dunstaffnage rapidly earned an international reputation for its studies in Loch Etive, Loch Eil and the Rockall Trough, complemented by experimental studies of the physiology, developmental biology and behaviour of marine organisms.

These achievements on the international and national levels were recognised in 1977 when Ron was awarded the CBE for his services to marine science, and his contribution to science, much of it interdisciplinary and strongly linked with universities, was further acknowledged by Heriot-Watt University which awarded him an Honorary Professorship in 1979.

Ron had time for many other activities. His biological interests extended into the field of conservation where he was a member of the Nature Conservancy Council's Committee for Scotland and a Vice-president of the Marine Conservation Society. His social interests found expression in the active part he played in the local community, a leading figure at the Kilmore Highland Games each year and as chairman of the Community Council for many years. Beyond parish boundaries, he was a Board Member of the North British Hotels Trust which distributes charitable funds throughout the highlands and islands of Scotland, and his service on the Council of the Royal National Mission to Deep-Sea Fishermen linked his social concerns with his fascination for the sea in a very personal way.

Ron's vision of marine science was dependent on continuity linked with innovation. His retirement in 1987 coincided with a period of retrenchment and it distressed him and many others to see the SMBA programme curbed and the cancellation of programmes that took the long-term view. History takes time to reveal itself, but now, a decade later, perseverance and new opportunities at Dunstaffnage are substantiating Ron's vision. The need for better understanding of the sea and the importance of marine science to Scotland are now widely recognised. Concepts and methods are fast developing and Dunstaffnage provides an ideal location at which to test them. The vigorous scientific programme that continues at Dunstaffnage provides a fitting memorial to the man who started it and who led the Association through a period of growth and change for over two decades.

**J B L MATTHEWS**