

SYSTEMATICS ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

September 2019

Message from the President of the Systematics Association

I've been involved with the Systematics Association for quite a number of years now but it is still something of a surprise to be its current president. But there it is. [I am honoured, of course](#). I'm not going to waste space and time (yours and mine) with any introductory waffle. My task here is to simply introduce this second electronic newsletter by saying enough to convince at least some of you that this is a perfect vehicle for a future contribution from your good selves.

Unless I'm really way out with my dates (and archives), which I probably am, the last Systematics Association Newsletter appeared November last year, the first electronic only edition, direct to your inbox. The Newsletter was just that: a newsletter – with news. Prior to that, our newsletter was a c. 25-page printed item with numerous articles and reviews complete with its own ISSN number. The last printed copy I can put my hands on is issue number 33, for 2011 – definitely not the last to be printed, maybe issue 35 was the last; 34 is online, but I searched high and low for a printed copy with no luck. Never mind. Alongside news, issue 33 had a range of different items: an article on Darwin and poetry ([by John Holmes](#)), progress in botanical nomenclature ([by Maria Vorontsova](#)), someone not being very nice to me about a book of mine, me (and comrade Ebach) being very nice about an old book (Published in 1981...is that old?) and an interview with [Jonathan Wiens](#), an enlightening entry into the world of a herpetologist. I mention these items simply to say that the pages of the electronic newsletter are now open to you all, on any subject – preferably biological systematics (I did manage to sneak in [a bit about musician John Zorn](#) not so long ago); and I'd obviously prefer no more people not being very nice to me – although that wouldn't entirely exclude you from inclusion. So basically, if you have something that might fit into our 'free-and-easy' promotional spot, send it along. And there's always book reviews and scientist interviews, and so on. We'll do our best to help you get it in.

The Systematics Association Biennial – Bristol 2019

As a kind of introduction to that invitation, let me just reflect a little on the Systematics Association biennial held in Bristol just few months ago. With four themed symposia, and some open sessions, variety and breadth was evident. The four, mentioned elsewhere in this newsletter, were: ‘Incorporating fossils into phylogenies of extant taxa’; ‘Cryptic taxa - artefact of classification or evolutionary phenomena’; ‘The contribution of systematics to conservation’; and ‘Challenges in modern phylogenetics: molecules, morphology and methods’. Let me not stretch your patience by commenting on all four symposia, just a few items that attracted my attention – but *nota bene*, my selection is obviously based on my own set of prejudices and preferences (and one of my favourite Christopher Hitchens’ books is *Letters to a Young Contrarian*).

The ‘Cryptic taxa’ and ‘Systematics and conservation’ symposia had more than their fair share of enlightening talks, focused to a greater or lesser extent on what has been known for as long time as the ‘species problem’, even though, for some of us, that problem might be an illusion. As I wrote elsewhere in the context of cryptic species: “The *species problem*, or *species question*, has challenged comparative and evolutionary biologists since long before Darwin. Yet it is likely that the problem was given a sharper if not entirely different focus after the publication of Darwin’s “*On the Origin of Species*” – perhaps for no other reason than Darwin tackled the issue of species’ *origin*, how do species come into being, rather than just their *discovery*, how do we recognise natural entities. Those two issues – how do we discover the species *taxon*, and how do species come into being – was the primary focus of a recent symposium held at the biennial. Framed around the issue of cryptic taxa, the symposium participants tackled the following question: “*Cryptic taxa – artefact of classification or evolutionary phenomena?*” As usual, under these circumstances, my thoughts turn to taxa in general and the recollection of words written nearly 30 years ago but still relevant today: “Controversy springs from a reductionist view of biodiversity as a species-, or population-, level phenomenon, as if species, or populations, were the only units of life and evolution. Why not consider taxa in general as units, and embrace the full measure of biodiversity?” (Nelson & Ladiges, 1990. *Journal of Biogeography*, *17*, pp. 559-560). Why not indeed? Would the ‘species problem’ then go away? I suspect it just might (for a different approach to the same subject try Doolittle, 2019, *Philosophy and Theory and Practice in Biology*, 11:14; although a far more amusing contribution is Mario de Pinna’s ‘*Species tot sunt diversae quot diversas formas ab initio creavitiv—A dialogue on species*’, *Arquivos de Zoologia* 45: 25-32). The notion of *classification artefacts* is interesting too and having just given Alessandro Minelli’s ‘*The galaxy of the non-Linnean nomenclature*’ a first pass, I recommend it you (Minelli, A. HPLS (2019) 41: 31).

Interestingly enough, the second item that attracted my attention in the Biennial appeared in an open session rather than the ‘Incorporating fossils into phylogenies of extant taxa’ session, what would have been its natural home. Luke Parry’s ‘Does incorporating fossils influence phylogenetic hypotheses?’ is already, or will be, of some significance. I would guess that the ‘bones’ (couldn’t resist) of that presentation are now available to be freely read in *BioRxiv* as ‘*Death is on Our Side: Paleontological Data Drastically Modify Phylogenetic Hypotheses*’. I have no intention of spoiling anyone’s reading fun (well, for drivel you could go to: <https://crev.info/2019/08/extinction-is-not-evolution/>) so I won’t comment on this in detail save to mention one item: much of the earlier criticism towards fossils and their relevance came prior to having any numerical methods of

analysis. I have often wondered – molecules or morphology, fossils or genomes, it doesn't really matter – how much artefact is introduced by the method itself: how many of those nodes on our trees are really actually found in the *data* and are not simply methodological artefacts? I mention this here as today's common understanding of synapomorphy is somewhat different from what it was way back then. Alarming though it might seem perhaps there's no understanding of synapomorphy in molecular studies at all. Maybe it's not a case of what is or is not of relevance in terms of the data. Maybe the right question (or a better question?) is: where do the artefacts come from – and how can we tell which nodes they are? And an even more pressing question: how do we get rid of them? In my view, Koch & Parry have given us a baseline study – now it just needs the application of, well, something or other, to rid ourselves of artefact, if indeed it exists (which it does – and of course, if you're wondering, I do know the answer, I do know how to get rid of it. There will be more on that from me if pressed).

Other Items

I want to mention three relatively unrelated items but all worth a little bit of your time. Always having clumsy print sequences but volume 4, part 1 of the *RES [Royal Entomological Society] Handbooks for the Identification of British Insects, British Coleoptera larvae. A guide to the families and major subfamilies* is now available, written by Peter M. Hammond, Jane E. Marshall, Michael L. Cox, Leslie Jessop, Beulah H. Garner & Maxwell V.L. Barclay, a very fine bunch of people. A summary (provided by Beulah Garner) has this: "The insect fauna of Britain is probably the best-studied on the planet, having attracted the attention of enthusiasts since the 17th century. Some of our most eminent scientists started as collectors and identifiers of insects, particularly beetles, including Darwin and Wallace. Providing enthusiasts, whether amateur or professional, with the means to identify British insect species has always been one of the Society's highest priorities". I'm more than happy to promote these kinds of items: they take a long time to put together but are almost always immensely useful and have a pretty decent shelf-life.

The second, and somewhat different, item is the short novella *Mr Darwin's Gardener*, originally written in Finnish by Kristina Carlson (as *Herra Darwinin Puutarhari*). This English language edition was published by Peirene Press in 2011, translated by Emily and Fleur Jeremiah who "form a multilingual mother-and-daughter translation team". It's described on Peirene Press's website as "A postmodern Victorian novel about faith, knowledge and our inner needs" – hopefully that won't put you off. It's a short (112 pp.) account of life in and around [Down House](#). You probably won't learn much about Darwin's actual gardeners, nor much about Darwin himself, but it's a two-pint (one cigar) read in your local – if you still have one (a local that is, not a cigar).

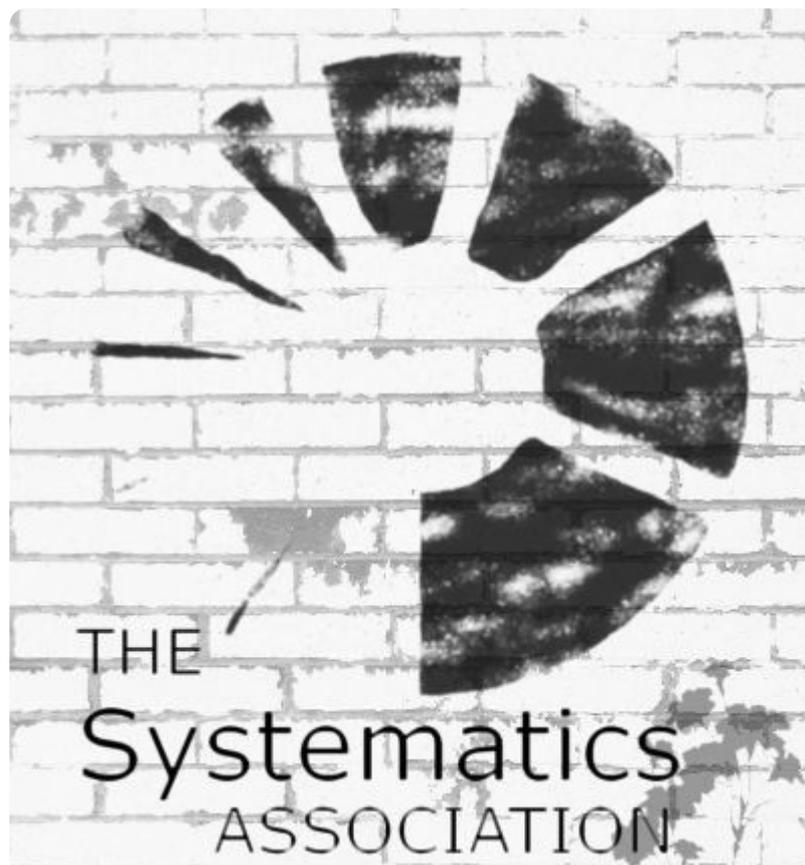
Finally, and with as much modesty I can muster, I'd encourage you to at least have a look at 'Ronald Brady and the cladists' – in contrast to my ever amusing daughter's assumption about its content, it does not concern a little known and obscure 1970s rock band (<https://doi.org/10.1111/cla.12397>). Finally, let me just note that the Association is as big as its members so if you want something done, need something to happen, let us know. We'll do our best. Better still, the SA's efforts are pushed on by its council who all do a fantastic job in keeping

this show going. Come November places on the council will become free. Consider it. It's not the worse decision you could make.

David Williams (President of The Systematics Association)

A VIEW ON THE BIENNIAL CONFERENCE

Mon 17th - Wed 19th June 2019



The 10th Systematics Association Biennial conference ran from 17th -19th July in Bristol. Symposia covered a range topics pertinent to contemporary systematics, including: the role of molecules and morphology in phylogenetics, the incorporation of fossils into phylogenies of extant taxa, and the importance of systematics to conservation. These symposia showcased much of the work that is being undertaken in these fields that will likely have an important bearing on the future direction of systematic research. Further, in addition to the specific symposia, there were several open sessions throughout the conference, within which there was a wide variety of talks ranging from Cryptic diversity in North-East Indian Horned frogs, to the use of Phylogenomics to resolve early events in bacterial evolution. When also taking into account the poster session, the conference covered an exciting array of different topics, demonstrating the relevance of systematics throughout biology.

As well as the talks and posters, the conference also provided a warm, friendly, and inclusive atmosphere for the UK systematics community to discuss ideas and projects during the coffee and lunch breaks. Further, on the second night of the conference, there was a dinner in the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. This was a grand setting to enjoy a three course meal with the UK systematics community. The

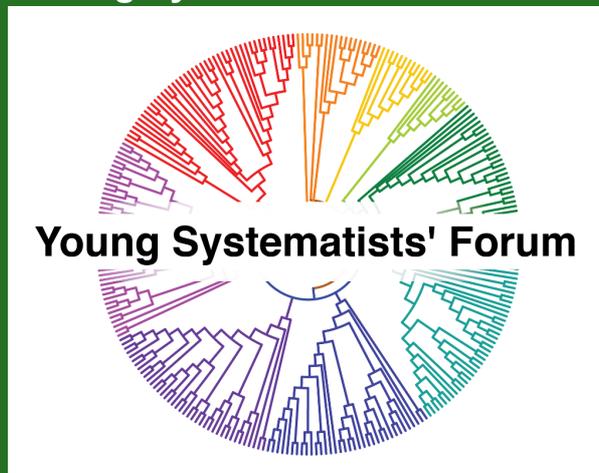
entire menu of this meal was vegetarian, and registration to the conference dinner was free to students. A nice touch by the organizers.

Overall, the conference was an important opportunity to consider different areas of systematic research, and exchange ideas between researchers. Such opportunities are of fundamental importance to the future of systematics, and will play an important role in the continued development of the field in the coming years.

Tom Carruthers (Systematics Association Students' Representative)

FUTURE EVENTS

Young Systematists' Forum 2019



The 21st edition of our renowned symposium for young systematists will be held at the Natural History Museum, London on **Friday 22nd November**. Registration is free and everyone is welcome!

More details can be found [in our website](#) and [registration is now open](#).

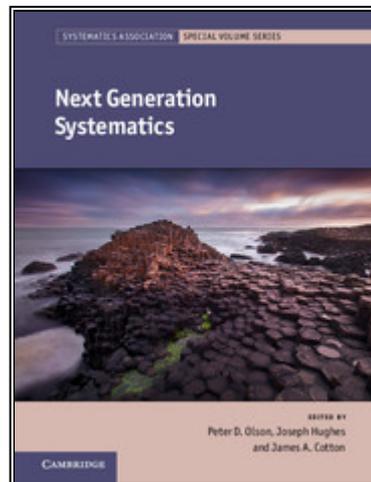
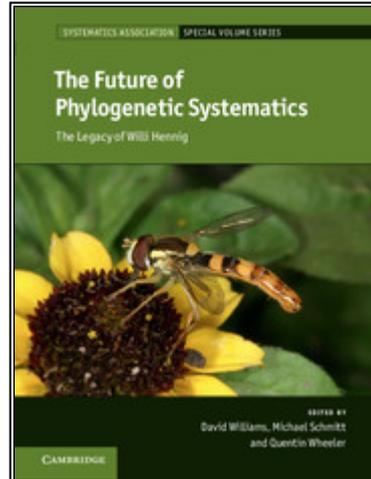
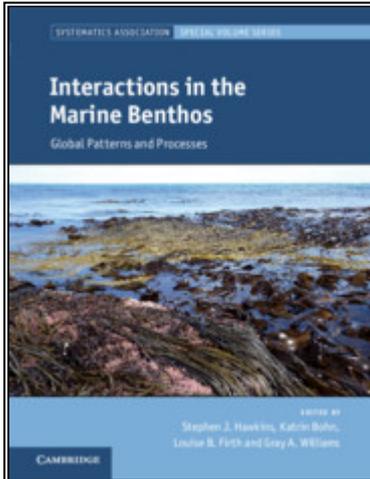
Annual General Meeting & President's Lecture

The 2019 Annual General Meeting of the Association will take place at the Linnean Society, Burlington House (Piccadilly, London) on **Wednesday 27nd November 2019 at 5 pm**.

It will be followed at 6 pm by the President's Lecture. **Prof Andy Brower** from Middle Tennessee State University will talk about "[The Role of Philosophy in Systematics](#)".

There will be a reception after the lecture for members and their guests. More details can be found [here](#). Everyone welcome and encouraged to attend!

RECENT PUBLICATIONS



WEBSITE & SOCIAL MEDIA

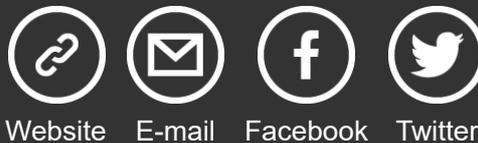
Please do take a look at the newly re-designed Systematics Association website: <http://systass.org>. Our website officer, Barbara Mackinder, has put in a lot of effort to migrate the site to a new platform, updating the content and giving it a bright and clear new design.

Any constructive suggestions would be very welcome and will help to refine and develop the site in the future, please send them to systassweb@gmail.com.

We want to keep our members more up-to-date with the activities of the Association. In combination with our newly re-designed [website](http://systass.org), [Twitter](#) feed, and [Facebook](#)

page, this new electronic Newsletter will be used to let members know about forthcoming events, calls for funding and symposia, offers and benefits, new publications, and other announcements.

A short Newsletter like this will be sent out at least twice a year, usually after one of our quarterly Council meetings. Please do contact us at newsletter@sysass.org if you have any constructive feedback, and ideas. Although we may not have capacity reply to you individually, your feedback will be taken on board and we will change the newsletter format based on members' suggestions.



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