

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

**ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS JOHN TALBOT ROBINSON**

Dr. John Talbot Robinson, professor emeritus of zoology, died on October 12, 2001. An internationally preeminent scholar, Professor Robinson was among a handful of excavators--investigators who established the nature of some of our earliest human ancestors and the broad outline of human evolution.

Professor Robinson was born on January 10, 1923, in Elliot, South Africa. He grew up on a farm in South Africa, where he developed his lifelong interest in natural history, particularly animal form and function. After completing high school, he entered the University of Cape Town, from which he received a B.Sc. in 1943, and a M.Sc. in 1944, both in zoology. He began studies for a doctorate in marine biology at Cape Town, but interrupted them in 1946, when he accepted a post as assistant professional officer at the Transvaal Museum in Pretoria. Shortly after his arrival at the Transvaal Museum he became assistant to one of the world's leading paleontologists, Dr. Robert Broom, FRS, who had turned his attention from the reptile--mammal transition to the evolution of man. Broom and Robinson maintained an extremely productive collaboration for four years, until Broom's death in 1951. Together they identified new hominid fossil bearing sites and found over 300 specimens of early humans, the Australopithecinae, including the famous "Mrs. Ples" skull and the Sts 14 pelvis. Robinson received his D. Sc. from the University of Cape Town in 1955. His dissertation, "The Dentition of the Australopithecinae" was published in 1956. He continued at the Transvaal Museum, becoming assistant director, until 1963 when he came to Madison as professor of anthropology and zoology. In 1967 he moved full time into the Department of Zoology, where he remained until his retirement in 1983. He served as director of the University of Wisconsin Zoological Museum from 1979 to 1981.

Robinson's contributions to the field of human evolution were immense. In 1946, when he began his collaboration with Broom, the scientific community was just beginning to accept that the South African fossils were ancestral to modern humans. The character of our early ancestors and the evolutionary trajectory that led from apes to australopithecines to modern humans remained unknown. (Louis Leakey did not find any Olduvai australopithecines until 1959.) The only substantial sample of australopithecines known at that time was excavated by Broom and Robinson. The famous "Mrs. Ples" skull, excavated by Broom and Robinson in 1947, was the first essentially complete skull of an adult australopithecine discovered; it played a pivotal role establishing the australopithecines as ancestral to modern humans. Robinson went on to elucidate the nature of the biological adaptations of the australopithecines and their evolutionary relationships. He put the individual morphological characteristics of australopithecines into a comprehensive picture of hominid adaptation and evolution. He established that two lineages of hominids had existed in the past, one vegetarian, the other omnivorous and ancestral to Homo. Robinson made the first broad functional analysis of the postcranial anatomy of the australopithecines, establishing that they were committed bipeds, like their human descendants.

Professor Robinson is survived by his wife, Professor Emerita Sybil Robinson of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Theatre and Drama.

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