



**Dr. Robert Geesink**  
(Photograph Ruth van Crevel, 1985)

**ROBERT GEESINK**  
(1945–1992)

On 2 September 1992 Rob Geesink died a week before he would have reached the age of 47. He had been associated with the Rijksherbarium from his student days in the sixties onwards. For his MSc programme he successfully revised the Portulacaceae for Flora Malesiana and carried out an experimental-ecological study of the genus *Bangia* (red algae). In 1971 he received his congratulatory ('cum laude') MSc degree. From 1972 to 1974 he was executive taxonomist in the Thai–Dutch cooperative project for the Flora of Thailand, a post during which he made four botanical explorations. In 1976 he was finally appointed on the staff of the Rijksherbarium, from 1987 to early 1990 as Project Leader of the research group for Tropical Phanerogams.

Rob's talents and interests covered a unique and broad range; from handy-man to theorist, and from efficiency improvement in the daily routine of plant collecting and taxonomy to the application of information theory in evolution. As a student he impressed his supervisors Van Steenis and Den Hartog, when he developed a device to shake and aerate algal cultures with the aid of spare motorcycle parts. Later 'inventions' included the use of a bottle cap in combination with an electric cigarette lighter to boil and rehydrate delicate herbarium fragments, a noise-reducing exhaust for engines, and a do-it-yourself altimeter for trees. His eye for the practical is also apparent from the enthusiasm with which he took the initiative to produce, together with other colleagues, a fully revised version of Thonner's 'Key to the Families of Flowering Plants', from the production of a punched card key to the genera of SE Asian Leguminosae, and from his analysis of practical changes needed to ever complete Flora Malesiana. During his PhD study, initially aimed at a revision of the genus *Millettia*, but later modified to a generic treatment of the tribe Millettieae ('Scala Millettiearum', published in 1984), Rob had felt a strong need for a more thorough knowledge of theoretical aspects of systematics, especially of phylogenetics. Insights developed during broad and intensive background reading were shared with students and colleagues through introductory manuals and in regular reading and discussion circles which Rob initiated both in Leiden and Wageningen, and which are continued after his death with a nation-wide attendance. In the last years Rob was especially interested in the newly developed theory of evolution as an entropic process as well as in the philosophy of systematic science. He must be given credit for introducing modern cladistics and historical biogeography to the Rijksherbarium.

As a colleague Rob could be a very helpful and warm person, who picked his friends without prejudice and who had a healthy dislike for the status factor. His kindness was very real, and he did not attempt to show any when convention would

have been the only motive. The party he threw in an old castle on the occasion of his PhD with a Mediaeval Breughelian dinner to be eaten with bare hands and with a teasing jester to enliven the occasion illustrates his taste for the unconventional. His hobbies ranged from motorcycle technology and stereoscopic photography to classical, neoromantic music. Recordings of the latter were played in his tent on field expeditions, and some Mahler and Wagner compositions must have sounded for the first time in far-away forests.

The last four years were difficult ones. Taking his task as project leader of the tropical group very seriously and committed to the acceleration of the progress of the Flora Malesiana project, Rob gradually became disillusioned by the lack of direct success, and by what he considered as lack of support for the introduction of professional research management. These problems were compounded by a personal ambivalence between full commitment to a demanding Flora project on the one hand, and to fundamental aspects of systematics on the other. Early 1990 he resigned as project leader. Late 1991 he asked to be released from all taxonomic revision work on the Papilionoideae, and to move to the Institute of Theoretical Biology, to devote himself entirely to phylogenetic and theoretical systematics and evolutionary theory. Discussions were well underway to create a joint working group between the two research institutions when, in June 1992, Rob suffered a serious brain haemorrhage while on vacation. Just before he had been actively preparing his contribution for the Willy Hennig Symposium in Paris later that summer, to which he had much looked forward.

Rob leaves a rich inheritance to all the fields he touched in his versatile, but too short professional life. His ideas on systematics and evolution are carried forward by a number of students and colleagues. His earlier contributions to taxonomy and plant identification will also remain of long-lasting value, and the Papilionaceae treatment for Flora Malesiana will be on the sound basis of all the preparatory work he had invested in the family. Letters received from friends and colleagues all over the world, following his death, testify to his helpful and kindhearted nature. The Rijksherbarium and Institute of Theoretical Biology are greatly indebted to him for his contributions to research, teaching, collection management and to general awareness.

Our sympathy goes to his wife Dia and his three children Willem, Anne-Hess and Janna.

Pieter Baas & Rino Zandee

Eponymy:

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- *Argostemma geesinkii* B. Bremer — In: *Ann. Missouri Bot. Gard.* 76 (1) (1989) 25.
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