



REFLECTIONS ON A REMARKABLE YEAR DAVID RAUBENHEIMER

David Raubenheimer graduated with a B.Sc. in Biological Sciences from the University of Cape Town, South Africa, in 1984. In 1985 he obtained a B.Sc. Honours (Zoology) and in 1987 an M.Sc., both from the University of Cape Town. In 1987 he was awarded a Sir Henry Strakosch Memorial Fellowship for postgraduate study at Oxford. There he registered for a D.Phil., which he completed in 1991. In the same year he took up a one-year Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Cape Town, before returning to the Zoology Department at Oxford to take up a Departmental Lectureship in Animal Behaviour, Neurobiology, and Entomology. He occupied this position until 1998, when he was appointed to a Senior Research Fellowship in the same Department and simultaneously to a Tutorial Fellowship at Magdalen College, Oxford. He lives in Oxford with his wife Jacky and two sons (Gabriel, aged 6, and Julian, aged 4). – Address: School of Biological Sciences, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland, New Zealand.

My recollection is vivid of the few days spent in Berlin in June 2002, visiting Wiko in advance of taking up my Fellowship in October of that year. Among the many colourful and exciting impressions of that, my first trip to Berlin and to an Institute that was to be my intellectual and social home for 10 months, there are two that stand out in particular.

First is the atmosphere among the staff at Wiko – at the same time extraordinarily welcoming, serene, and proficient. Second is the mood among the then-Fellows. While at the time less easy to describe, my impression was of a vague paradox – a sort of frenzy among the most relaxed corpus of academics I'd encountered. Relaxed, I recall speculating, from an extraordinarily privileged year, with a bit of help from the rich June sunlight; and

frenzied, I could only imagine, by the need to wring just a little more out of the privilege before returning to what, for most, must surely have been a more trying existence.

I assimilated these experiences not just as an observer, but as an extrapolator of how *I* would be placed in a year from then. With no distractions, in an atmosphere like that, come June 03 I would have achieved all I set out to achieve and a bit yet, and would be *ready to leave* with a glow of accomplishment. I had read several Wiko yearbook entries from past Fellows and resolved to take their hard-earned advice: I would not arrive with several months' worth of unfinished manuscripts, I would not over-commit myself to university visits and seminars, I would not attempt to be a fluent German speaker in my first few months – I would *not* do all the things that are likely to end in the kind of last-month frenzy I thought I sensed among the incumbents. To indulge in a bit of hyperbole, I felt like a young man contemplating the terminally aged – the world lay before me, whereas for them it would shortly all be over.

But oh, how quickly the time has passed! Now my June–July frenzy is over, the Wiko staff have turned their attention to the next generation, and I have the distance to reflect on what I did and did not achieve in my year at Wiko. I arrived with the intention, together with my collaborator Steve Simpson, of completing a book on the biology of behaviour and making serious inroads into another, on human nutrition. As it turned out, once the dust of unfinished obligations (the ones the Wiko yearbook had warned me about) had settled (this was around January) and we could for the first time view our projects with clarity, we made good progress initially on the nutrition book. Our arguments developed smoothly, a structure suggested itself, and we laid out the story to the point where we felt that all the book needed was time to perform the relatively rote task of fleshing out the chapters. In the interim, we had developed some of the ideas initiated in the writing of that book, and written them up for journal publication.

After those further – but necessary – diversions, we were finally ready to turn our attention to the behaviour book. This, by far the more conceptually challenging of the two, is the kind of project that does not lend itself to brief spurts of enthusiastic attention squeezed opportunistically into a schedule dominated by teaching, university administration, and pursuing a research career. We tried for several years to write it in this way, all the while aware that what it really needed was an uninterrupted period of undivided attention. With the opportunity finally come, we set about reviewing our earlier work on the book, re-visiting the relevant literature, and marshalling our ideas for its completion. The time was right: we had three months ahead, in which not one but *both* of us could work

on it simultaneously (a rare opportunity), and all within the heady atmosphere of behaviour/evolution/neurobiology/philosophy/complex systems analysis discussions that emerged from our year-group. In these inspired circumstances, it seemed that it would be a wasted opportunity not to relax our grip on the previously-conceived structure of the book and see what would grow.

What grew (in my part of the writing) was a single section in one of the original chapters (on the evolution of nervous systems), first into a full chapter, which then split into two, into three, and it wasn't until this recalcitrant subject had spread itself over four full chapters that order was once again restored. These additions have extended the project to cover new and important conceptual ground, as well as contributing greatly to structuring the arguments we originally set out to develop in that book. They have also taken me into many new and exciting areas in biology, on a scale I haven't experienced since that other privileged, exploratory period of my academic career, my Ph.D. For the time and intellectual space that enabled me confidently to go with this unplanned, unruly unfurling of ideas with any hope of returning in one piece, I am deeply grateful to Wiko. My intellectual explorations gained both inspiration and structure from the many interactions I had with other members of the Fellowship, and to them I am also grateful.

The benefits are set to outlast this remarkable year. I was told by a literary colleague (incidentally, over one of those memorable Wiko dinners) that novelists sometimes find it difficult to decide whether the best description of their working process is that of an author writing a book or a book writing an author. I now understand this more clearly. My foundations as a biologist have been broadened and strengthened in a way that has already influenced the direction of my research interests and will continue to do so whether I like it or not. The year has also brought associations with several new colleagues, some of which are developing into lasting contacts and even collaborations. There have been downsides too: my expectations of library services have been irreversibly inflated!

The year at Wiko was memorable for more than my experience as a Fellow there. As a family, we are particularly appreciative of the way that every effort was made to accommodate the needs of children – especially in a year that brought many more of them than Wiko is accustomed to – and of partners. This was all the more effective for the spontaneous warmth and generosity of individual staff members, of whom our children (and their parents) still speak fondly. To them, a big thank you for contributing to a family experience that was exciting, pleasant, and memorable!

Last, but by no means least, Wiko provided me with a valued opportunity to share a year, an office, and a whole lot of inspiring and memorable discussions with my close colleague Steve Simpson. Steve and I have worked together for 16 years, during which time we have developed many ideas, and jointly written many papers, but always under the time-fragmenting constraints of university life. During this year we had the freedom to pursue conversations and ideas over the timescale not only of lunch hours (but them too) or brief meetings slotted between other appointments (blissfully absent, throughout), but over days and even weeks. This has been particularly valuable since during the course of the year I decided to take up a job offer in New Zealand, so that not even those beery lunches and brief appointments will be an easy option for the future. A year of unfettered thinking and writing together has been a fitting end to what for me has been a truly remarkable era.

And what better start to a new one!