

Anne Innis Dagg, Who Studied Giraffes in the Wild, Dies at 91

She was believed to be the first Western scientist to study the animals in their natural habitat, but she struggled to overcome sexism in academia.



The biologist Anne Innis Dagg in 2016. She saw her first giraffe when she was 3, she once said, "and I remember thinking, 'This is beautiful.'" Anne Innis Dagg Foundation



By [Clay Risen](#)

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Anne Innis Dagg, who broke ground in the 1950s as one of the world's first biologists to study giraffes in the wild, then spent decades fighting sexism in Canadian universities before finally finding long-overdue acclaim in the 2010s, died on April 1 in Kitchener, Ontario, west of Toronto. She was 91.

Alison Reid, who documented Dr. Dagg's life in the 2018 [film](#) "The Woman Who Loves Giraffes," said the cause of her death, in a hospital, was pneumonia.

Dr. Dagg was often called "the Jane Goodall of giraffes," but in a different world the attribution might have been reversed. Dr. Dagg traveled to Africa in 1956, four years before Dr. Goodall did her first fieldwork with primates; in fact, she

is believed to have been the first Western scientist to study African animals of any type in the wild.

At the time, very little was known about the behavior of giraffes, especially outside zoos. Dr. Dagg spent more than nine months in the South African bush, observing for 10 hours a day from her beat-up Ford Prefect how the animals ate, mated, fought and played.

The results, which she [presented first in a 1958 paper](#) for the Zoological Society of London and later in a 1976 book, “The Giraffe: Its Biology, Behavior, and Ecology,” established her as the world’s leading expert on the gawky-legged, mottled *Giraffa camelopardalis*.

That recognition was not enough to overcome entrenched sexism within the academic world. She had a promising job as an assistant professor at the University of Guelph, in Ontario, and she had published significantly more peer-reviewed articles than some of her male colleagues. But her department chairman told her in 1971 that she was unlikely to reach tenure.

She applied for a similar position at Wilfrid Laurier University, also in Ontario, but was passed over for a less accomplished male candidate. She filed a complaint with the Ontario government; the issue was drawn out for nearly a decade, but the complaint was ultimately rejected.

Dr. Dagg spent short stints teaching at other universities before landing at the University of Waterloo as a part-time instructor. She used her spare time to write books on biology — she was among the first to study homosexual behavior in mammals — as well as on feminism and sexism.

Then, in 2010, a group of zookeepers invited her to attend a conference in Phoenix as their guest of honor. A vibrant field, giraffology, had sprouted around her many papers and, in particular, her 1976 book.

“Every zookeeper, every scientist, had it on their bookshelf, but no one knew her,” Ms. Reid, the filmmaker, said in a phone interview.

The attention grew from there: television documentaries, magazine profiles and finally Ms. Reid’s film, which introduced Dr. Dagg to international audiences. She was appointed a member of the Order of Canada in 2019, the same year she received an official apology from the University of Guelph.



Dr. Daggs in 2017. She began belatedly receiving attention for her work in 2010, when a group of zookeepers invited her to attend a conference in Phoenix as their guest of honor. Credit...Anne Innis Daggs Foundation

“I’ve been ignored my whole life, and just to find out now that I’m actually a person and people really think I’m interesting,” [she said in an interview with The Guelph Mercury in 2019](#). “It’s pretty amazing. I love it.”

Anne Christine Innis was born on Jan. 25, 1933, in Toronto. Her parents were both well-known academics at the University of Toronto. Her mother, Mary Quayle Innis, was a dean, as well as a novelist. Her father, [Harold Innis](#), was chairman of the political economy department; one of the university’s constituent colleges was named in his honor.

She saw her first giraffe when she was 3, during a family vacation to the Brookfield Zoo in Chicago.

“It was very tall and I was very small,” [she told CTV News in 2021](#). “And I remember thinking: ‘This is beautiful. I think this is magnificent.’ And it went on from there.”

She received a bachelor’s degree with honors in biology in 1955 and a master’s in genetics a year later, both from the University of Toronto. All along, she focused on giraffes.

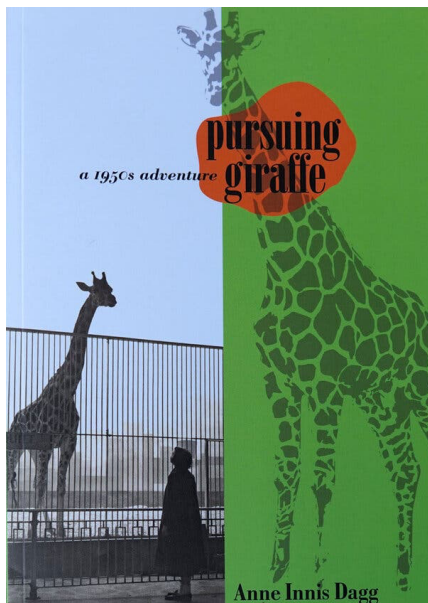
Her honors degree came with a small cash award, and with that money she looked for a way to get into the field. But she was rejected by more than a

dozen African governments and foundations, with the thinly veiled message that women do not belong in that line of research.

She changed tactics and began giving her name as simply “A. Innis,” with better results. A rancher in South Africa with a 62,000-acre spread, home to about 95 giraffes, said she could stay with him. When she revealed her gender, he hesitated, but he ultimately welcomed her.

After nearly a year in Africa, she returned to Canada, and to academia, receiving her doctorate in animal behavior from the University of Waterloo in 1967. Her dissertation became the basis of her 1976 book, which she wrote with J. Bristol Foster — the first full-length scientific text on giraffes and, for years after, the only one.

She married Ian Dagg in 1957. He died in 1993. She is survived by their children, Mary, Hugh and Ian Dagg; her brother, Hugh; and a grandson.



Dr. Dagg’s books include a memoir, published in 2006, in which she detailed her time observing giraffes in Africa in the 1950s. Credit...Wilfrid Laurier University Press

Dr. Dagg’s many published works include a memoir, “Pursuing Giraffe” (2006), in which she recounted her time in Africa. The book, written in the present tense, ends on a bittersweet note, lamenting the fact that she would most likely never get back there.

“I’m grieving because my dream of a lifetime is over at 24,” she wrote. “I fear that I will never again visit the giraffe in Africa, and I never have.”

The book caught the attention of Ms. Reid, who considered it first for a feature film, then decided on a documentary. As part of the filming, she arranged for Dr. Dagg to return to the South African ranch where she had first worked, some 60 years prior — and to visit the giraffes where she thought she would never see them again.

Clay Risen is a *Times* reporter on the Obituaries desk. [More about Clay Risen](#)

https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/17/science/anne-innis-dagg-dead.html?campaign_id=301&emc=edit_vpgu_20240418&instance_id=120497&nl=your-places%3A-global-update®i_id=177901256&segment_id=164130&te=1&user_id=eac38c6faf1f143145c18ad20dab966b