

Guy Coburn Robson (1888–1945): from celebrated natural historian to obscurity

Guy Coburn Robson (1888–1945) : d'un naturaliste célèbre à l'obscurité

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Summary: Guy Coburn Robson (1888–1945), a former Deputy Keeper of Zoology at the British Museum of Natural History, now Natural History Museum, London, United Kingdom, passed away of natural causes in a psychiatric hospital at the age of 57. Despite his scientific authority, what little has been published about him is replete with error, or contradictory. By consulting surviving medical and military files, grey and peer-reviewed literature, museum correspondence, and public record documents, we present a more comprehensive picture of this man's adolescence, World War I record, professional career, contribution to the study of natural history, illness that contributed to his admission into various psychiatric institutes, and those that contributed to his death. References to his declining mental health having influenced the quality of his research are critically evaluated and deemed to be untenable. An updated bibliography of his research output is presented, and one surviving and at least three presumed-lost, unpublished manuscripts are identified.

Résumé : Guy Coburn Robson (1888–1945), ancien Deputy Keeper of Zoology [conservateur adjoint de zoologie] au British Museum of Natural History est décédé de causes naturelles dans un hôpital psychiatrique à l'âge de 57 ans. Malgré son autorité scientifique, les rares publications le concernant sont entachées d'erreurs ou se contredisent. En consultant les dossiers médicaux et militaires conservés, la littérature grise et évaluée par les pairs, la correspondance muséale et les documents d'archives publiques, nous proposons un portrait plus complet de son adolescence, de son parcours pendant la Première Guerre mondiale, de sa carrière professionnelle, de sa contribution à l'étude de l'histoire naturelle, ainsi que des maladies qui ont conduit à son admission dans divers établissements psychiatriques et, en fin de compte, à son décès. Les hypothèses selon lesquelles la détérioration de sa santé mentale aurait compromis la qualité de ses travaux sont ici examinées de manière critique et jugées non fondées. Une bibliographie actualisée de sa production scientifique est présentée, et des manuscrit inédits – un conservé et au moins trois autres présumés perdus – sont identifiés.

Introduction

Nine days after Germany unconditionally surrendered in World War II, Guy Coburn Robson (1888–1945), a personable and highly regarded malacologist and natural historian, passed away at Holloway Sanatorium, Virginia Water, in the United Kingdom. It was 17 May 1945, he was just 57 years old, and he had lived in institutions for the best part of eight years. Other than his passing having been “sudden” (Anonymous, 1945; Smith, 1945) or “after a long illness” (Hindle, 1945, 1946), of what he died and where his remains had been interred, if they had been, were unreported. Much of what little else has been published about him was similarly contradictory, incorrect, or not supported by evidence. To right an injustice done to his legacy, we build on what is known of this man, and correct inaccuracies in accounts of his life that resulted in the quality of his research being questioned.

Born on 11 February 1888 in South Woodford, Essex, Guy was 5 foot 11.5 inches (~1.82 m) according to a military examination certificate, or 5 foot 9.5 inches (~1.76 m) according to his

military enrolment papers.¹ Other than the frontispiece (plate 1) in vol 22 of the 1936 *Proceedings of the Malacological Society*, and an image of him in Hodgson *et al.* (2021: fig. 2C), few other images of Guy are known; we present one further (Fig. 1). He was evidently slim, wore spectacles, and had thinning hair into his 30s. He had been described as having an agreeable and pleasant temperament, “a characteristic thoughtfulness for dumb animals” and capable draughtsman, watercolourist, and etcher of considerable ability (Smith, 1945), to have had many friends (Anonymous, 1937a), and, according to his brother and only sibling, Selby Robson (1886–1964), to have been, at least as an adolescent, gregarious.² He was also described as being “a most skilled and entertaining lecturer” (Anonymous, 1932).

Guy reputedly began working for the British Museum of Natural History (BMNH), now Natural History Museum (NHM), London, in 1907 (Anonymous, 1945), 1910 (Anonymous, 1910a, b), 1911 (Anonymous, 1937a; NHM employment records), or 1913 (Hindle, 1945, 1946). *The London Gazette* (Anonymous, 1910a)

1. National Archives (UK). War Office, Officer's Services, First World War, personal files ref WO_374_58651.

2. G. C. Robson (hereinafter GCR), Holloway Sanatorium medical records (1944–1945). Male Case Book ref: 7267/3/22. Surrey History Centre, Surrey, UK. Pp. 6.

Fig 1. Guy Coburn Robson, image titled “Mollusca Study, 1924. Basement western galleries” (NHM photograph code PH/1/5/1/10).



announced that he started on 14 November 1910, but NHM employment records indicate this to have been 1 June 1911. His handwriting sample (Fig. 2) reveals that he officially began working for the BMNH in 1911, but that he was appointed to his position in 1910. Fresh from Oxford University, 22 years old, following his appointment to the BMNH and only having been recently conferred his Bachelor of Arts degree, Guy spent five months at the Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn in Naples on an Oxford University Biological Scholarship (Robson, 1911). Upon his return he assumed his role at the BMNH, where he remained through to 1936. His tenure was broken only by service during and convalescence following World War I (WW1), and a period of uncharacteristic but recurring absences between December 1933 and November 1936.

Education (1901–1910)

Both Hindle (1945, 1946) and Smith (1945) maintained that Guy was home-schooled because of “delicacy as a child,” but from what age and what was meant by “delicate” is unknown. His brother indicated that his childhood was “normal.”³ From 13 years age in September 1901 (Smith, 1945) to 18 years in 1906 he attended Forest School, Walthamstow (Anonymous, 1906a). No stranger to academic achievement, he secured a scholarship to attend Forest School (Anonymous, 1902) and thereafter was awarded prizes in classical subjects such as English, Roman and religious histories, general knowledge, poetry, and Latin (Anonymous, 1903; 1904; 1905a, b; 1906a, b). From 1905 to 1906 he was a co-Editor of the *Forest School Magazine*, and was also involved in theatre (Anonymous, 1904, 1906a). In 1905 he was awarded an unspecified Kings College prize (Anonymous, 1905b), and in 1906 received scholarship offers to further his education from each of Hertford, Wadham, Worcester, and New College constituent colleges of Oxford University (Anonymous, 1906a, b).

At Oxford, Guy passed his Moderations (first public exam) in Classics with a 2nd in Lent Term of 1908, and, following a shift in academic interest, in June 1910 (Trinity Term) placed First Class in the Final Honours School of Natural Science and received his BA (Anonymous, 1910b). In early 1922 (Oxford University Hilary term) he was conferred an honorary MA (pers. comm. Michael Stans-

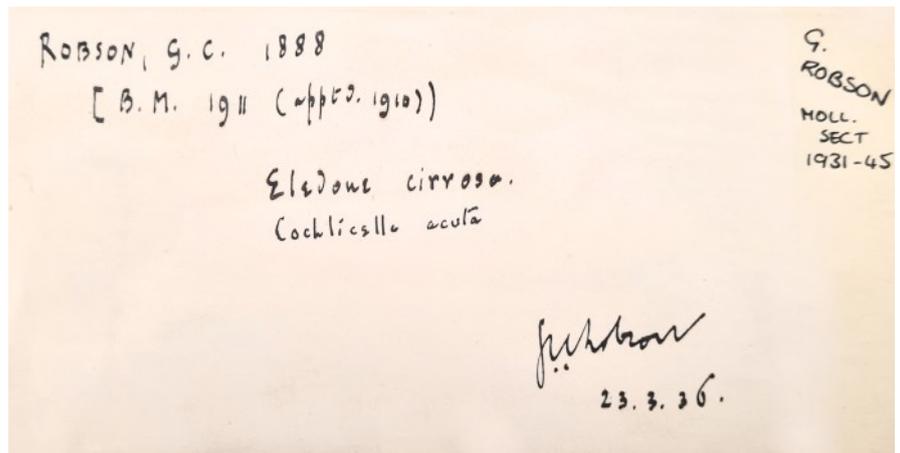


Fig 2. Guy Coburn Robson's, sample handwriting, with employment appointment and commencement dates at the British Museum of Natural History.

field).⁴ However, despite being highly intelligent, articulate, and occasionally referred to as “Dr Robson” by the press, colleagues (Anonymous, 1933), and even in the title of one obituary notice (Hindle, 1945), Guy lacked a PhD. Mathematics was a self-declared academic weakness (Anonymous, 1905).

Research output (1911–1946)

Guy, a prolific writer with diverse research interests, produced at least 116 mostly substantial publications. To teuthologists he rose to prominence for his works on octopuses and squids—a group of molluscs upon which he published no fewer than 55 papers and a seminal monograph in two volumes (Robson, 1929, 1932). To evolutionary biologists he may be better remembered, perhaps unfavourably (Huxley, 1942), for his works on defining species (Robson, 1928) or variation of animals in nature (Robson & Richards, 1936). To other malacologists, he may be known for his contributions to the taxonomy and anatomy of molluscs in general (land, freshwater, and marine; both fossil and Recent). A revised bibliography of his works (excluding *Encyclopedia Britannica* entries) that corrects errors in, and includes omissions from the account of Adam (1946), is presented as **Supplement 1**.

A product of his Naples scholarship, Guy's first paper (Robson, 1911) described how a parasite affected the sexual physiology of a crab. Several further papers followed, primarily on the taxonomy or anatomy of pulmonate gastropods, before he described his first cephalopod—a species of *Sepiadarium* from Australian waters (Robson, 1914) (Fig. 3). His next project, a description of a collection of

3. Idem

4. Michael Stansfield, Archivist and Records Manager, Oxford University, UK.

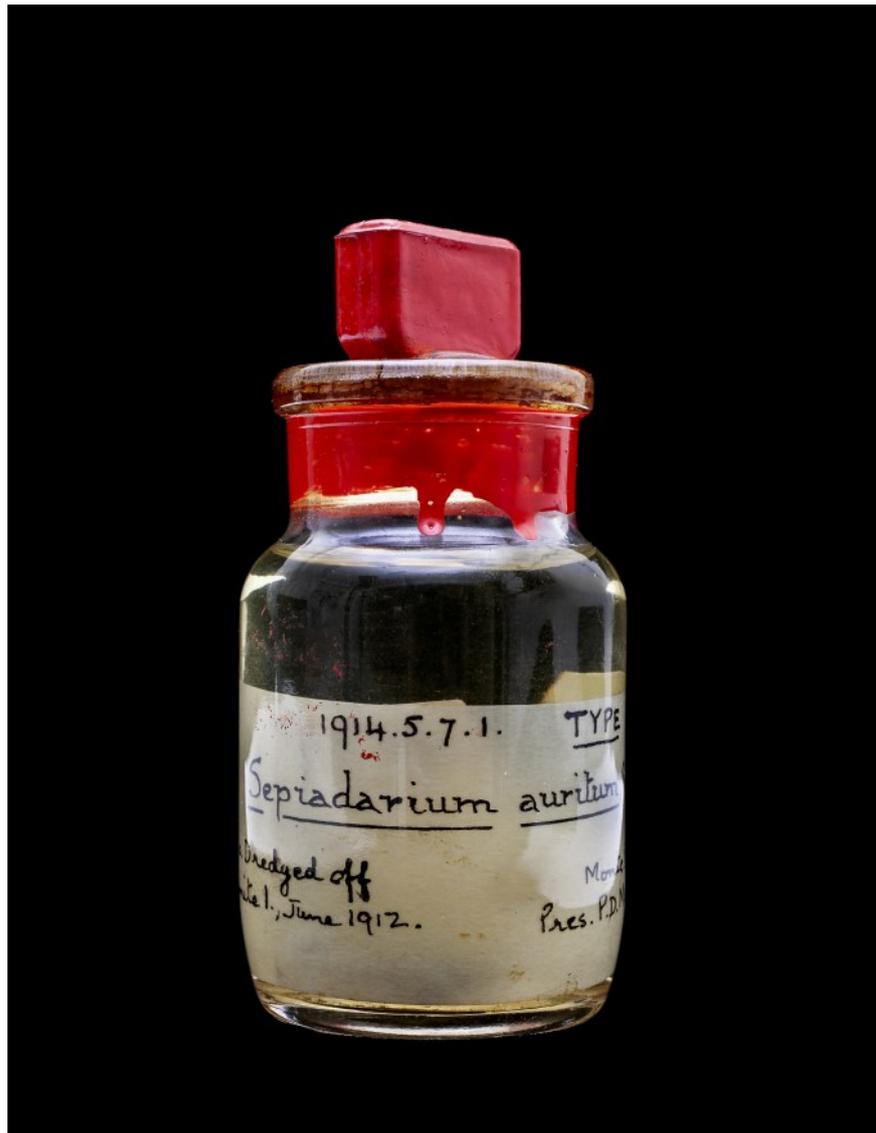


Fig 3. Specimen bottle (*Sepiadarium auritum* Robson, 1914); Guy's first-described cephalopod.

Indian Ocean cephalopods, was completed and read on his behalf by Professor J. Stanley Gardiner (1872–1946) at a Linnean Society meeting on 17 June 1915, but its publication was delayed until after WW1 (Robson, 1921). Therein (*loc. cit.*: 430) Guy wrote “*The author [Guy] has been struck, while in the course of this work, with the necessity for a more intensive study of these animals [cephalopods] for the purposes of systematic zoology.*” From this it is apparent that Guy’s interests in both systematics and cephalopods were piqued from an early stage in his career.

Career, and research-community outreach (1911–1936)

Between 1911 and 1925 Guy was promoted from Second-Class Assistant to Assistant at the BMNH (NHM records do not specify when); then to Assistant Keeper on 1 January 1926, and Deputy Keeper on 1 April 1931

(Anonymous, 1937a; NHM employment record archives). He also served as Secretary of the Challenger Society from 1921–1928 (CS, 1928, NHM archives), was a general committee member of same in 1929 (CS, 1929); was treasurer of the Society of Experimental Biologists from 22 December 1923 to 1926 (SEB, 1974); and from 1923 to 1924 was active in, and served on the editorial board of *The British Journal of Experimental Biology* (Erlingson, 2013). After serving as Editor for the Malacological Society of London from 12 February 1926 to 19 February 1928 he was elected its Vice President (19 February 1928) and then President (14 February 1930). An abridged biography is presented in **Table 1**. His period prominence and involvement in the research community is unquestionable. However, within years and at the pinnacle of his success, he all-but disappeared from the scientific community. We sought to understand why.

Date	Event
11 February 1888	Born
1901–1906	Forest School, Walthamstow
1906–1910	Oxford University, Oxford
1910 (June)	Conferred BA, Oxford University, Oxford
1911 (June)–1936 (November)	British Museum of Natural History
1911–1925	Second Class Assistant, Assistant
1926 (January)	Assistant Keeper of Zoology
1931 (April)	Deputy Keeper of Zoology
1921–1928	Secretary of the Challenger Society
1922	MA (Hon) Oxford University, London
1923–1926	Treasurer, Society of Experimental Biologists
1923–1924	Editorial board of The British Journal of Experimental Biology
1926–1928	Editor, Malacological Society of London
1928–1930	Vice President, Malacological Society of London
1929	Committee member, The Challenger Society
1930–1933	President, Malacological Society of London
1933–1936	Vice President, Malacological Society of London
12 February 1937	Honorary Member, Malacological Society of London
17 May 1945	Passed away, Holloway Sanatorium, Virginia Water, Surrey

Table 1. Abridged biography of Guy Coburn Robson.

Guy's fixed-(three year)-term as President of the Malacological Society ended on 10 February 1933, whereupon he assumed the role of Vice President for three further years (to 14 February 1936). Because the presidency of this Society is a title held for three years only,⁵ this change in status is uninformative. However, from early 1933 to November 1936, Guy's research output also largely ceased, and from about 20 December 1933 to November 1936 he was frequently absent from work. The strain that his recurring and extended absences placed upon his colleagues, his having exhausted all forms of salaried leave, and his lack of productivity forced the museum to terminate his employment on 28 November 1936 on grounds of incapacity and Civil Service sick-leave regulations.⁶ The final indignity to him occurred on 10 December when Martin Hinton

(1883–1961), a newly appointed Keeper of Zoology, contacted his brother Selby, with whom Guy had been staying,⁷ and asked if he could retrieve Guy's remaining personal possessions from the museum, or otherwise advise the museum on how best to dispose of them.⁸ Today, a microscope bearing his name remains (Fig. 4). In the lead-up to Guy's dismissal, the museum acknowledged that his case deserved the utmost of sympathy,⁹ but he had transitioned from being an esteemed staff colleague (Smith, 1945) to someone perceived to be a burden. Four days later, 14 December 1936,¹⁰ Guy checked himself into Bethlem Royal Hospital (hereinafter 'Bethlem'), where he resided until June 1944. On admission, he informed the attending physician that he had tendered his resignation from the museum (contrary to NHM archived correspondence¹¹)

5. <http://malacsoc.org.uk/about/rules/> accessed 3 April 2023.

6. GCR, BNHM personnel file notes, 28 November 1936. Original manuscript in Natural History Museum, London, Archives DF ZOO/205/106-131/13.

7. GCR (1936–1944), Bethlem Royal Hospital medical records. Bethlem Art and History Collections Trust, UK. Pp 13.

8. M.A.C.H/RP (Martin Hinton) to S. Robson, 10 December 1936. Original manuscript in Natural History Museum, London, Archives DF ZOO/208/20.

9. GCR, personnel file notes, 24 October 1936. Original manuscript in Natural History Museum, London, Archives DF ZOO/205/106/130/14.



Fig 4. Guy Coburn Robson's microscope.

10. GCR (1936–1944), Bethlem Royal Hospital medical records. Bethlem Art and History Collections Trust, UK. Pp 13.

11. GCR, BNHM personnel file notes, 28 November 1936. Original manuscript in Natural History Museum, London, Archives DF ZOO/205/106/131/13.

12. GCR (1936–1944), Bethlem Royal Hospital medical records. Bethlem Art and History Collections Trust, UK. Pp 13.

13. R. Winckworth to W. Adam, 20 December 1937. Original manuscript in Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, Brussels, Belgium (courtesy Dr Yves Samyn).

and that the museum's acceptance of this had aggravated his depression.¹² The *Kensington News and West London Gazette* reported that Guy had "retired" from the BMNH (Anonymous, 1936b), and Anonymous (1937) wrote that he had "resigned," but having being managed from his position, if this was the case, renders neither account strictly correct. As an aside, Guy's NHM personnel file contains no resignation letter.

At least one of Guy's peers had some understanding of his personal problems, for correspondence between Ronald Winckworth (1884–1950) and William Adam (1909–1988) dated 20 December 1937¹³ reads:

"[Guy] has had a bad time and I am quite sure he will never write another line on cephalopods. During his sane intervals he lives with his brother, but he unfortunately has repeated relapses when he returns to a mental hospital. It has been a very sad affair, originating with shell shock during the war and brought on again by domestic trouble."

Except for being elected an Honorary Member of the Malacological Society of London on 12 February 1937 (Anonymous, 1937b), years would pass before Guy's name reappeared in print, sadly in the form of three brief obituary notices (Hindle, 1945, 1946; Smith, 1945). Adam (1946) delivered a far-more-fitting tribute to Guy's life and contribution to the understanding of cephalopod taxonomy and phylogeny. No detailed biography of Guy has appeared since.

Inaccuracies in obituary notices

In two near-identical obituary notices, Edward Hindle (1886–1973) speculated about Guy's military past and his personal and academic interests (Hindle, 1945, 1946). Both accounts contained inaccuracies, with one (Hindle, 1945) even referring to Guy as "Dr G. C. Robson" in the title, and misspelling his middle name "Colborn." Further errors or allegations therein included Guy having spent a year in Naples when it was five months, that "... in 1935 [Guy] had another nervous breakdown

necessitating his resignation from the museum,” he was bombed during an air attack in WW1 and spent a year in hospital suffering from shell-shock before being invalided out of service, “... it is doubtful whether he [Guy] was entirely happy in his museum life ...,” and that “he [Guy] never seemed to have fully recovered from his illness [referring to shell shock].” To someone unfamiliar with Guy’s research output and history, Hindle’s references to his “delicacy” (mentioned also by Smith (1945)), hospitalization, ongoing issues with shell shock, general unhappiness, the implication that he had multiple nervous breakdowns, and death after a long illness, suggest that Guy was and had been for some time both mentally and physically fragile. We present compelling evidence to the contrary.

Guy’s physical prowess (1903–1916)

In September of 1903 Guy joined the Forest School Militia Volunteer Corps. Before leaving school in August 1906 he had achieved the rank of Second Lieutenant, and was adept with a rifle (Anonymous, 1906b). He also played cricket (Anonymous, 1904) and was a half-back in football, described as a “very energetic tackler,” and someone who excelled at running, hurdles, and the high jump (Anonymous, 1905, 1906b). By 1907 he had taken up soccer and cross-country running (Anonymous, 1907), and tennis by 1910 (Anonymous, 1910c: 221). He also played half-back for his old school as an “Old Forester” from 1910 to 1912 (Anonymous, 1910b, 1911, 1912). His pre-enlisting medical assessment¹⁴ on 21 July 1916 categorised him as fitness level “B1,” meaning “free from serious organic diseases, able to stand service on lines of communication in France, or in garrisons in the tropics,” and “able to march 5 miles, see to shoot with glasses, and hear well” (Epsom & Ewell History Explorer, 2023). Were it not for a reference in his Bethlem medical file (18 December 1936) that at age 9.5 years he had rheumatic fever and “slight valve trouble,” but had no persistent problem with walking or talking,¹⁵ an obscure reference to his health in 1906, that “we hope for greater things yet if Robson’s health holds good” (Anonymous, 1906a: 91), and a strained muscle prior to a running race (Anonymous, 1906b: 56), the many accounts of his school athleticism are inconsistent with any notion of his being physically fragile. His pre-enlistment medical evaluation also noted no major health conditions.

World War I (1914–1918)

Guy delayed enlistment in the military for domestic reasons; he was the only family member left to care for his father, whose health and business had been seriously affected by the war (Shindler, 2018). Serving his country in other ways, in September 1914, with Dr Francis Bather (1863–1934), he was instrumental in establishing First Aid training for BMNH staff under the auspices of the local Red Cross branch. By May 1915 the volunteers, led by Guy, mobilised as a section of the 31st London Voluntary Aid Detachment of the Red Cross Society, acting as stretcher-bearers for the London Ambulance Column, attending the wounded arriving at London railway stations, and unloading men at hospitals. Guy’s section also watched for Zeppelins at night from the museum roof. In October 1915 his application to undertake Red Cross duties in Italy was denied because the museum would not apply to Treasury to fund his wages during his absence (Shindler, 2018).

In April 1916 Guy joined the Officer Training Corps at Oxford University for two months, then applied for an Officer Commission in June, and voluntarily enlisted in the Royal Artillery on 7 June 1916. He was called up to serve shortly afterwards on 17 July, was first posted on 21 July to the Royal Field Artillery at the Officer Cadet Training School at Topsham in Exeter, and then on 18 August was posted to the Cadet school at Trowbridge and trained in siege artillery. Following his graduation on 11 October 1916 he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the 2/1st Essex and Suffolk Royal Garrison Artillery manning the coastal defences at Shoeburyness. It is here where he probably first saw active service, or in January of 1917 when stationed at a siege battery.¹⁶

Physical Health (1917–1918, 1936, 1944)

Our first indication that Guy experienced any health-related issue during WW1 is his reference to “my never very legible writing is now rendered more illegible by a damaged thumb.”¹⁷ This is followed by his 29 January 1917 admission to hospital with bronchitis, contracted after being stationed on an exposed battery and living in a draughty hut.¹⁸ Several months later (June) he was admitted for “acute

14. National Archives (UK). War Office, Officer’s Services, First World War, personal files ref WO_374_58651.

15. GCR (1936–1944), Bethlem Royal Hospital medical records. Bethlem Art and History Collections Trust, UK. Pp 13.

16. National Archives (UK). War Office, Officer’s Services, First World War, personal files ref WO_374_58651.

17. GCR to S. Harmer, 26 April 1916. Original manuscript in Natural History Museum, London, Archives DF ZOO/200/64/39.

18. GCR to S. Harmer (hereinafter SH), 3 February 1917. Original manuscript in Natural History Museum, London, Archives DF ZOO/200/66/33/0.

19. GCR to SH, 17 September 1917. Original manuscript in Natural History Museum, London, Archives DF ZOO/200/66/33/1-3.

20. GCR to W. T. Calman, 8 July 1917. Original manuscript in Natural History Museum, London, Archives DF ZOO/252/1/13/69.

21. GCR to SH, 17 September 1917. Original manuscript in Natural History Museum, London, Archives DF ZOO/200/66/33/1-3.

22. National Archives (UK). War Office, Officer's Services, First World War, personal files ref WO_374_58651.

23. GCR to S. Harmer (hereinafter SH), 3 February 1917. Original manuscript in Natural History Museum, London, Archives DF ZOO/200/66/33/0.

24. GCR to W. T. Calman, 8 July 1917. Original manuscript in Natural History Museum, London, Archives DF ZOO/252/1/13/69.

25. Idem

26. GCR, Holloway Sanatorium medical records (1944–1945). Male Case Book ref: 7267/3/22. Surrey History Centre, Surrey, UK. Pp. 6.

27. GCR (1936–1944), Bethlem Royal Hospital medical records. Bethlem Art and History Collections Trust, UK. Pp 13.

28. National Archives (UK) ref J 77/3165/7189.

neurasthenia,”¹⁹ and again on or before 8 July 1917 for problems with deep-seated varicose veins.²⁰ By 19 September he was admitted to a hospital for “shell-shocked officers” in Kensington,²¹ where he remained until at least 9 December 1917 and was diagnosed with “peripheral neuritis” (14 November 1917).²² He was discharged on 22 June 1918. Should a comment written to Sidney Harmer (1862–1950),²³ the then Keeper of Zoology, be anything to go by, “I have to confess that I do not find any reward in the Military Life adequate to compensate me for the deprivation of my Zoological work,” Guy did not particularly enjoy his military posting.

“Neurasthenia” is now a seldom-used medical term for conditions characterised by exhaustion, a variety of pains, alterations in the senses, morbid fears, impairments in cognitive functioning, and alterations in mood (Abbey & Garfinkel, 1991). These symptoms were frequently associated with exposure to explosions from artillery shells during WW1, and the term neurasthenia became widely known by the equally ill-defined term “shell shock” (Alexander, 2010). The latter of Guy's two diagnoses (that led to his discharge), peripheral neuritis, is more specifically characterised by damage to nerves outside of the brain and spinal cord (peripheral nerves), and is associated with weakness, numbness, and pain, usually in the hands and feet (Pai, 2023). While never explicitly stated in any medical report, this diagnosis may be related to a pre-existing condition with varicose veins, because on 8 July 1917 Guy wrote to William Calman (1871–1952) at the (then) BMNH to say that his “*deep-seated varicose veins limited his chances of serving his country in a more active capacity,*” and that he could hardly walk.²⁴

We have found no evidence that Guy was ever bombed or directly wounded during the war, nor any evidence that he was “shell shocked,” except that based on an imprecise diagnosis and his admission to a hospital that treated this condition. While in one letter he cryptically refers to doing something “useful and INTERESTING [his emphasis],”²⁵ neither could be construed as being bombed nor wounded. Accordingly, we have found no evidence to support Hindle's allegations that Guy was bombed, or that he spent a year in hospital suffering from shell shock. Notably, the obituary notice of Smith (1945) makes no reference to Guy being shell shocked, but he does

mention that Guy “*for some time was laid up with injury to his feet.*” Despite Guy's claim that he could hardly walk, we are unaware of his experiencing any mobility-related issue after being discharged from hospital through to 1936; in 1936, when admitted to Bethlem, his “state of bodily health” was cited as “very good.” To the contrary, severe oedema in his legs and feet limited his mobility from at least 1944.²⁶

Marriage (1918)

Two days before being discharged from the Officer's hospital in Kensington, on 20 June 1918, Guy married Beryl Sinclair Nicholson (1899–1980). They first met (circumstances unknown) in 1912.²⁷ She was 19 when they married, and he 30, and they had two children—a son, Felix (1921–1999), and a daughter Ursula (1925–1996). Out of respect for the family's privacy we do not delve into their personal lives from 1918 to 1932, but we must mention certain public-record details that are relevant to correcting inaccuracies in commentary regarding Guy (this being our objective). Additionally, while we have reconstructed a diary of Guy's professional and public post-war engagements through to his 1936 departure from the BMNH, for brevity and relevance we do not dwell on those events from 1918–1930 either.

A marriage breakdown (1932–1933)

As president of the Malacological Society of London, Guy typically presided over normal meetings throughout much of 1930 and 1931. However, in 1932 he is infrequently mentioned in Proceedings records, and meetings for the last three meetings of the year were chaired by Alfred Kennard (1870–1948). Then, on 23 January 1933, Guy petitioned for a divorce from Beryl, who had moved out of the family home and taken Ursula (7) and Felix (11) with her to live with a Thomas Chegwiddden (1895–1986).²⁸ Later that year (14 October) the *Richmond Herald* (UK) (Anonymous, 1936a) ran a brief summary of court proceedings regarding Guy's divorce application, divulging that Thomas had been a close friend of Guy and Beryl since “1926 or 1927,” that Guy had learned of their affair in August of 1932, and that Guy's “efforts to induce Beryl to leave Thomas” had been unavailing. Guy's absence

from Malacological Society Presidential duties in the latter part of 1932 is perhaps consistent with his investing more time with his family during an understandably difficult time.

In the week preceding Beryl's departure, Guy was busy securing and preserving a giant squid that earlier that month had stranded on Southside Beach, Scarborough (Robson, 1933a). However, following his detailed report on this specimen, and several other brief publications (Robson, 1933b, c; Robson & Bidder, 1933) that comprised six pages in total, he all-but abandoned research and public engagement, excepting (of which we are aware) one 7 September 1933 event at which he spoke on "the limitations of adaptability in the animal kingdom" and the value of coordinated zoological surveys and centralised publication of results to the British Association for the Advancement of Science (Anonymous, 1933). On or around 20 December 1933 Guy voluntarily admitted himself to Woodside Hospital.²⁹

Institutionalisation (1933–1945)

To our knowledge, no medical files remain for Guy between 1933 and 1936, and details of the time he spent in various institutions are limited (**Table 2**). On 20 April 1934 his doctor (Desmond Curran (1903–1985)) at Woodside Hospital had written to the BMNH to request additional leave for Guy, suggesting that he would make a full recovery from "a recent illness." However, other than mentioning that Guy experienced anxiety, the nature of his illness was unspecified.³⁰ Although NHM archives through to 1936 include further correspondence between Guy and BMNH staff, or that otherwise involves him, nothing therein details Guy's ailment(s). It is, however, apparent from these documents that Guy spent

considerable time away from work, and that the museum went to great lengths to accommodate him and his absences, until continuance was no longer viable.

The first page of Guy's admission sheet to Bethlem in December of 1936³¹ specifies "no previous attacks" of depression, for his first attack to have been at age 45, for it to have persisted for "3 to 3.5 years," and for his depression to have been "marked." This suggests that Guy experienced no problems with depression prior to mid- or late 1932.

When admitted, Guy was deemed neither suicidal nor homicidal, but within four days (18 December) he was placed under constant observation. Hereon, and through to his passing, evidence for his being "troubled" is incontrovertible, in that he resided within institutions and was obviously depressed, but other than his making repeated references to a sense of having failed his family and of personal inadequacy, he volunteered few specifics regarding the root cause(s) of his troubles. In December 1936, he revealed that a contract to complete a book had caused him grief. We deduce that he referred to *Variation of Animals in Nature*, a collaboration with Owain Richards (1901–1984), the publication of which was delayed until 1936. While contract documents dated 21 June 1928 between Guy, Owain, and Longmans, Green & Co Ltd³² for delivery of this book (an anticipated 500-page tome) specified no delivery date nor made mention of an advance being paid, Guy and Owain did receive a lump-sum payment of £60 on 1 November 1933 for, we assume, submission of a draft manuscript. Because this book was printed in February 1936, Guy had obviously fulfilled his contract to the publisher and provided a final manuscript before volunteering himself to hospital. Therefore, while

29. Dr D. Curran to W. T. Calman, 20 April 1934. Original manuscript in Natural History Museum, London, Archives DF ZOO/208/20.

30. Idem

31. GCR (1936–1944), Bethlem Royal Hospital medical records. Bethlem Art and History Collections Trust, UK. Pp 13.

32. The Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading, references MS 1393 3/5532 (Robson and Richards: Variation in Animal Nature (5 pages)), MS 1393 2/247/1047 (Robson and Richards: Variation in Animal Nature (3 pages)).

Year(s)	Institution/Hospital
1933 (December)–1934 (August)	Woodside Hospital, Muswell Hill, London
1934 (October)–1935 (April)	Maudsley Hospital, Denmark Hill, London
1935 (December)–1936 (May)	Maudsley Hospital, Denmark Hill, London
1936 (December)–1944 (June)	Bethlem Royal Hospital, Croydon
1944 (June)–1944 (August)	St John & Saint Elizabeth Hospital, London
1944 (August)–1945 (17 May)	Holloway Sanatorium, Virginia Water, Surrey

Table 2. Institutions and Hospitals (United Kingdom) at which Guy Coburn Robson stayed from 1933–1945 (exact start-and-end dates of hospital stays between 1933 and 1936 are unknown).

33. GCR (1936–1944), Bethlem Royal Hospital medical records. Bethlem Art and History Collections Trust, UK. Pp 13.

34. GCR, Holloway Sanatorium medical records (1944–1945). Male Case Book ref: 7267/3/22. Surrey History Centre, Surrey, UK. Pp. 6.

35. Idem

36. GCR (1936–1944), Bethlem Royal Hospital medical records. Bethlem Art and History Collections Trust, UK. Pp 13.

37. Idem

38. Idem

39. GCR, Holloway Sanatorium medical records (1944–1945). Male Case Book ref: 7267/3/22. Surrey History Centre, Surrey, UK. Pp. 6.

40. Golders Green Crematorium archives, www.thelcc.co.uk, entry for G. C. Robson in ledger, 23 May 1945.

41. GCR (1936–1944), Bethlem Royal Hospital medical records. Bethlem Art and History Collections Trust, UK. Pp 13.

preparation of this book may have contributed to his anxiety, it is unlikely to have contributed to ongoing problems with depression.

We were most fortunate to secure records of Guy's stays at Bethlem from 1936 through to 1944,³³ and from Holloway Sanatorium from 1944 to his passing in 1945.³⁴ These files contain personal information that is mostly inappropriate to repeat. However, we present representative excerpts from these records where they assist us to correct errors in obituary notices, or explain what next happens to Guy—again, with the objective being to right an injustice that was done to his reputation.

On 15 August 1944 when first admitted to Holloway Sanatorium, Guy's brother Selby maintained that Guy had returned "back to normal life" in 1939, but that he had a "relapse" in 1942.³⁵ These dates are mostly corroborated by doctor's entries in Guy's Bethlem file,³⁶ where routine references to Guy's general state of mental retardation and melancholy are interrupted by references to his making marked improvements. For example, file entries range from "*his whole day is spent in bed in a room with the windows closed*" (30 November 1937) to "*he shows definite improvement and is most interesting to talk to*" (30 December 1938), followed by an inexplicable year-long relapse from January of 1939–1940. In January 1940 his condition again improves, and an entry reads "*at the moment he is better than I have ever seen him*" (30 January 1940); in February an entry reads "*relatively [sic.] to what he has been one could almost call him an extrovert now,*" with notes (26 February 1940) also referring to him playing billiards with his "great friend," another inpatient, the British stage and film actor Owen Roughwood (1876–1947). In May 1940 an entry reads "his retardation has disappeared." This reprieve from depression persisted through to at least June, and quite possibly July 1942; he had even taken to venturing into London alone. Then, between 19 July and 10 August 1942, something triggered him, for on 10 August an entry reads that "*Guy had relapsed for no apparent reason.*" While his doctors suspected that they may have pushed him too hard, we note that this relapse roughly coincides with the release of *Evolution: The Modern Synthesis* by Julian Huxley (1887–1975), the first print of which (Huxley, 1942) appeared in the UK between June and August of 1942, the preface of which was written in

March of that year, and drafts of which almost certainly circulated among Huxley's peers prior to its release. Guy had only to read to page 31 of this tome to be humiliated by the savage critique of his 1936 *The Variation of Animals in Nature*, and 1928 *The Species Problem*, by his apparent friend (according to Erlingson, 2013), which Huxley referred to as an "*undue, belittling of the role of selection in evolution, and an over-emphasis of the origin of species as the key problem in evolutionary biology.*"

Guy's latest bout of depression, which persisted until at least August 1943, was followed by deteriorating physical health.³⁷ On 25 October 1943, he reported abdominal pain, and was jaundiced; a preliminary diagnosis of obstructive jaundice was made. Monthly entries through to April 1944 indicate that his health deteriorated progressively, but that there were continued delays in getting his condition medically assessed. Finally, on 8 June 1944, Guy was transferred to St John & Saint Elizabeth Hospital; days later, 14 June, he was discharged from Bethlem.³⁸ No St John & Saint Elizabeth Hospital medical records for Guy survive, but Holloway Sanatorium files indicate that he was treated there for jaundice from 8 June through to 15 August 1944. Eleven months on, at Holloway Sanatorium, Guy passed away of cardiac arrest, aggravated by biliary cirrhosis.³⁹ In the few days prior to his passing, which medical notes suggest was sudden and "while conversing with relatives," his condition had deteriorated significantly.

On 23 May 1945 the ashes of Guy Coburn Robson were sprinkled across the "crocus lawn" at Golders Crematorium, London.⁴⁰ His father, Thomas Pearson Robson (1857–1930) passed away of Bright's disease (nephritis).⁴¹ He was survived by his mother, Sarah Mary Broodbank (1861–1947), his brother Selby, and his two children, Felix and Ursula. Whether Guy died "suddenly" (*sensu* Anonymous, 1945; Smith, 1945) or after a "long illness" (*sensu* Hindle, 1945, 1946) all depends on whether you separate his protracted battle with depression from his relatively short bout of poor physical health.

Criticism of Guy's research output (1977 onwards)

This is where our abridged biography of Guy Coburn Robson's life could have ended were it

not for statements the preeminent teuthologist Gilbert Voss (1918–1989) made regarding him and his work, specifically referring to his two seminal monograph volumes (Robson 1929, 1932):

“Robson attempted a monumental task, which was doomed to failure before it was started. The number of species was too large and contained too few critical reviews; too many of the species were known only from unique specimens, often female; and he was now suffering from the mental difficulties that shortly forced his retirement from the British Museum” (Voss, 1977: 54).

Over a decade on, Voss continued:

“Unfortunately the systematics of the deep-sea octopods, and in particular the cirrates, have been sadly neglected. Robson’s (1932) monographic study of the cirrates was the last attempt to make order out of the group. It did not succeed, partly because of Robson’s mental decline and partly because of the poor quality and quantity of available collections” (Voss, 1988a: 303).

While collections of cephalopods at Guy’s disposal were unquestionably inferior to those available today, there is no evidence to suggest that Guy experienced any mental problem prior to December 1933 (it is possible for some issues developed in 1932 after learning of his wife’s infidelity). According to the preface in Robson’s second volume on octopuses, the text was completed by 2 November 1931. Ergo, Voss’s allegation that Guy was “*now suffering from the mental difficulties ...*,” or that this affected the quality of his research output, is untenable. Most recently, Hodgson *et al.* (2021) also suggested that Guy stood down from editing the *Proceedings of the Malacological Society of London* at the end of 1927 “*we suspect owing to health reasons,*” but it is more probable that he relinquished this role to assume even greater responsibility as the society’s President.

We posit that suspicion prior to and confirmation of Beryl’s suspected infidelity in August of 1932 (Anonymous, 1936a), the departure of his wife and children on 23 January 1933,⁴² his deep sense of personal inadequacy and responsibility for the breakdown in his marriage,⁴³ and his obligation to complete *The Variation of Animals in Nature*,⁴⁴ triggered Guy’s troubles, rather than anything he experienced during WW1 (as intimated by Hindle).

This is supported by Winckworth’s comment to Adam⁴⁵ that his current mental state was “*brought on again by domestic trouble.*” Should this be true then Guy’s mental decline in no way affected the quality of his research output when he was most productive.

We report Guy’s mental state to have improved considerably between 1940 and at least July 1942, and for a relapse in August of 1942 to broadly coincide with Julian Huxley’s harsh critique of two of Guy’s books dealing with evolution. Guy’s last bout of depression was followed by a relatively rapid deterioration in his physical health, leading to his death at 57.

Thiele (1935: 1689) commented “*Robson began a monograph of cephalopods, of which so far the octopods have been completed (1929 and 1932).*” Adam (1946) also concluded his eulogy to Guy with “*In studying it [referring to the two volumes of his octopus memoir] one cannot but regret that Robson had not the opportunity to treat similarly of the Decapoda.*” While our bibliography of Guy’s publications is more complete than that of Adam (1946), it is possible that other manuscripts exist. We have been unable to locate one titled “*Remarks on melanism in land mollusca*” that Guy presented on 9 May 1930 at an ordinary meeting of the Malacological Society of London. Guy also makes mention of his returning a completed manuscript for a new version of the Mollusca section of the BMNH *Collector’s Handbook* in correspondence with Sidney Harmer.^{46, 47} Three (1902, 1904, 1906) of the four editions of the BMNH *Collectors Handbook* predate Guy’s employment at the museum, but in the fourth edition (BMNH, 1921) a chapter on “*soft bodied and other invertebrate animals*” solely attributed to Harmer might rightly have included Guy as a contributing author.

Over and above his published output, further unpublished manuscripts do or did exist. NHM archives contain no draft manuscript on squids, so it appears that Guy had not embarked on any such project yet. However, one largely complete draft in the NHM archives written by Guy is titled “*On the use and modification of the arm-web in the Octopoda.*” A second largely complete draft on decapods of the “Arcturus” expedition was published posthumously (Robson, 1948). A further draft manuscript titled “*Breathing tubes of Cyclophoridae*” that was in Guy’s NHM files until at least 1975 cannot be located. Finally, we draw attention to a manuscript written by

42. National Archives (UK) ref J 77/3165/7189.

43. GCR (1936–1944), Bethlem Royal Hospital medical records. Bethlem Art and History Collections Trust, UK. Pp 13.

44. The Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading, references MS 1393 3/5532 (Robson and Richards: Variation in Animal Nature (5 pages)), MS 1393 2/247/1047 (Robson and Richards: Variation in Animal Nature (3 pages)).

45. R. Winckworth to W. Adam, 20 December 1937. Original manuscript in Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, Brussels, Belgium (courtesy Dr Yves Samyn).

46. GCR to SH, 4 May 1916. Original manuscript in Natural History Museum, London, Archives DF ZOO/200/64/39.

47. GCR to SH, 14 May 1916. Original manuscript in Natural History Museum, London, Archives DF ZOO/200/64/39.

48. GCR (1936–1944), Bethlem Royal Hospital medical records. Bethlem Art and History Collections Trust, UK. Pp 13.

49. Idem

Guy at Bethlem on “dreams,” or more exactly, a “*monograph on the mechanism of dreams from the organic point of view*,” as it is referred to in his medical file.⁴⁸ On 22 October 1941 his doctor [initials DW, we assume Dr Duncan Whittaker (1906–1969)] wrote to say that this manuscript was “*judicial and well expressed*,” before continuing “*He still sleeps badly and struggles hard against any reduction in his sedatives.*”

We can only imagine what Guy’s broken dreams involved, but we do hope that our contribution in some way helps him rest peacefully. We also hope that this contribution spells an end to any further questioning of the quality of his research. Finally, we note that according to Guy’s Bethlem medical file,⁴⁹ he “*was happy*” at work (18 August 1936), contrary to Hindle’s speculation otherwise.

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Appendix 1

Supplementary Material 1

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