

Primate Society of Great Britain
Alison Jolly – Osman Hill medal 2006/7

- Alison Jolly has been involved in primatology for more than 40 years.
- Throughout much of that time, her name has been one of the first encountered by those embarking on studying the subject – not least through her classic textbook, *The Evolution of Primate Behavior*
- First published in 1972, it has been a mainstay of anthropology and primatology courses for more than 30 years – and, despite the exponential growth in primate studies during the ensuing period, it still offers clear insights into our chosen order
- Alison has also written a further 5 single-authored books and co-edited another 3
- Her range is extraordinary, from her more familiar scientific stuff to her productions of wider appeal like *Lucy's Legacy* – a highly original consideration of the evolution of co-operation and inter-dependence, and her children's book, *Ako the Aye-aye*, published in both English and Malagasy (a second volume is to be published this year). Alison's writing is always accessible, whatever the target audience, and she is disarmingly direct and clear in describing and explaining her species of choice, the lemurs.
- I will single out three particularly major contributions that Alison has made to our subject:
- Firstly, her extraordinary work in the 1960s, exemplified by her 1966 *Science* paper (note – published before she was 30), linking primate sociality and intelligence, something we perhaps now so take for granted, it's hard to imagine the effort required for its establishment
- Shame on you if you have never taken the time to read the original paper. In many ways it has hardly dated at all – see the discussion of whether tool-use experiments in captivity really get at primate intelligence (and her ever so lightly barbed description of the 'genius' rhesus monkey reported to reached the elevated heights of having learnt

that a circle symbol meant ‘blue’, compared with the challenges of lemur social life)

- Wonder at this all the more given the limited development of primatology at the time, and the dominance of captive studies – Alison had recently undertaken the first ever intensive field study of any lemur species (actually two); she argues, from direct naturalistic evidence that primate intelligence evolved primarily for social functions.
- And such powerful and important ideas are described without fuss or hyperbole. She writes in disarmingly simple language – many sentences have fewer than 10 words, some as few as 5 – you can learn many things from reading her work.
- She’s not afraid to be expressive – a single file of sifakas ‘silently soaring against the blue sky in great ballet leaps’, stopping ‘to feed with no fuss or bickering’, and at times doing ‘battle, a kind of arboreal chess-game in which opposing knights hopped to strategic branches’. What we lose in restricting ourselves to so-called objective scientific writing.
- Secondly, Alison has sustained primate field work at the Berenty field station in Madagascar for over 40 years. Many here can perhaps only guess at the extraordinary motivation, dedication, and sheer hard slog that must have required. Featured in numerous scientific papers by generations of students and other researchers, as well as scientific documentaries bringing our subject to living rooms across the globe, the ring-tails of Berenty are one of the most precious long term sites we have.
- Thirdly, Alison has been a long-standing mover and shaker in the world of primate conservation – she’s a Life Trustee of Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust, and her work in Madagascar has been recognised by not one but two prestigious awards from the Malagasy government. Indeed, she very politely asked if we could possibly delay awarding her the Osman Hill medal, usually awarded at the Winter meeting, so she could attend a rescheduled meeting with Rio Tinto Zinc in Madagascar to try and influence possible environmental improvement in the perilous situation on the island. For once, Council was unanimous in its view – we could wait to Spring.

- Finally, during the process of nomination and preparation for awarding Alison the Osman Hill medal, one phrase kept cropping up again and again ‘Alison is such a lovely lady’, something which many PSGB members can echo from their own experience.
- On all counts, I am delighted, on behalf of the society to award the Osman Hill medal to Alison Jolly, and to invite her to present the 2006/7 Osman Hill lecture.

Ann MacLarnon
April 2007