Many years have now passed since Pierre-Paul Grassé [1895-1985] died. Yet, he remains among us through memory of his personality as well as by his published scientific legacy. Both were, in fact, exceptional. Those who have known him will never fail to recall his enthusiasm, his erudition, his esprit, his humour, and the liveliness of his thoughts, whether these were conservative or revolutionary. He has truly put a mark on his time by
both the quality and the profusion of his production in science that he devoted to biology in general and to zoology in particular.

Let us describe here some of the intriguing traits of the character of this man, whom we have known so well. P.-P. Grassé never hesitated to commit himself in discussions on the grand, general issues concerning Life itself, not only Evolution of course, but also the very Purpose or the Origin of Life. He belonged to the grand French tradition of those people who refuse to ascribe to the idea that the coming into existence of organisms or organs of unimaginable complexity, like the human brain, could be the result of the [repeated] action of some ‘blind’ coincidence. Grassé wrote: “Personally, I am deeply convinced that our ignorance of the actual causes of evolution is great, and thus even some of the most crucial mechanisms have escaped discovery by we humans. We are all full of impatience, we ceaselessly try to find our way...I envy those who have found in modern science their peace of mind and have, accordingly, managed to place the Anglo-Saxon God in their personal, internal temple.”

This quotation reveals a tormented mind, angry even, that culminates in something of a joke and exposes two remarkable aspects of his character. First, he himself could be characterized as a force of nature: a brilliant and eloquent speaker, a warm person, and a charmer as well. He energetically pursued the debate about the great questions of life and did not accept out-of-hand unargued rejections of his point of view. At times, he could be suddenly furious but knew how to suppress his temper immediately. Yet, through those outbursts he expressed his heart-felt desire to let truth prevail. Second, his knowledge seemed virtually unlimited. He had an encyclopaedic mind even in an era in which science had become excessively fragmented. He was, in short, one of those men who are truly a tribute to our times.

Among his principal oeuvre most certainly ranks the “Traité de Zoologie”, a genuinely monumental treatise on all aspects of animal biology: not only unprecedented in French, but having gained, by virtue of its significance and its comprehensive treatment, worldwide recognition throughout our branch of science.

P.-P. Grassé, who originally had envisaged a division of the Traité into 17 volumes, was soon convinced that most of those had to be subdivided into fascicles. Thus, for example eventually the two parts originally devoted to Mammalia have come to comprise no less than 10 volumes in this grand series. Once complete, the full array was meant to constitute some 47 fascicles. When the series started, it was ahead of its time as regards its modern style, its coherent concept and editing, the level of its illustrations, and the remarkable visual presentation realized through the offices of the publisher, Masson.

In this respect, Grassé not only gave directions “from above” in carrying through his ambitious project, but also participated in specific details. Where a chapter was missing, whether through the unavailability of a specialist, or following the death or failure of an author, Grassé undertook that task himself. Consequently, a substantial part of the already published volumes was not only conceived by him, but executed as well. He edited no less than 53 chapters and connecting texts in this encyclopaedic work, totalling 741 pages, almost a whole volume [given on average, nearly 1000 pages per volume].