## Acknowledgements

I thankfully acknowledge the help of all the people who did assist me, in many ways, throughout the development of this thesis. They know who they are.

I also acknowledge the support of the Spanish Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, the Comisión Interministerial de Ciencia y Tecnología (project MAR96-1856), and projects FANS and PIONEER (EC MAST Research Programme, contracts No. MAS3-CT95-0037 and MAS3-CT98-0170, respectively).

Master, I've filled my contract, wrought in Thy many lands; / Not by my sins wilt Thou judge me, but by the work of my hands. / Master, I've done Thy bidding, and the light is low in the west, / And the long, long shift is over . . . Master, I've earned it - Rest. (Robert Service, The Spell of the Yukon and Other verses).