

Sir Alwyn Williams

8 June 1921 - 4 April 2004

Sir Alwyn Williams - an Appreciation. First published on RSE Website April 2004

Sir Alwyn was President of the Royal Society of Edinburgh from 1985 to 1988 and his achievements in that role have been of lasting benefit to the Society. The purchase of the Society's fine premises, after tortuous negotiations, provided a secure base for subsequent developments of the Society and gave impetus to its wider recognition as Scotland's National Academy of Science and Letters.

This process was also much helped by Sir Alwyn being a Fellow of the Royal Society of London and Member of the Royal Irish Academy. As such, he was particularly well placed to foster much closer links with these sister Academies and the first tripartite meeting of their Presidents took place at RSE. This set the scene for continuing excellent relations based on a clear understanding of the complementary role of the RSE in relation to the other leading national academies of Britain and Ireland.

His Presidential Address *A Society for the Learned and the Leisured*, delivered as he demitted office in October 1988, was unforgettable. Beneath its very polished delivery, was a clear analysis (unsettling for many who heard it) of how the Society and the academic world would need to adapt, in order to have the relevance necessary to survive into the 21st century. Sir Alwyn was a most distinguished geologist, having held academic posts in that subject at Glasgow, Queen's Belfast and Birmingham, before returning to Glasgow University in 1976 as Regius Principal. It was, therefore, particularly fitting that the first in a continuing series of major international geological conferences - The Hutton Conferences - should have been held in Edinburgh during his Presidency. The conference proceedings were published in the Society's *Transactions: Earth Sciences*, thereby maintaining the link to James Hutton's own *Theory of the Earth* published in the first volume of *Transactions*. Sir Alwyn's reputation as a geologist was widely recognised, both nationally and internationally - he was an Honorary Fellow of the Geological Society of America and a foreign Member of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) and helped encourage closer links between PAN and RSE.

The many heavy demands of being Principal at an increasingly challenging time for the academic world did not bring his research activity to a halt and he continued to publish; but this was only possible by starting very early in the morning in the lab, before devoting a full day to the duties of being Principal. After retiring in 1988, he devoted his time enthusiastically to research and created a Palaeobiology Unit at Glasgow University where he worked tirelessly. His energy and devotion to research seemed almost limitless and he also played a key role in the substantial *Treatise on Invertebrate Palaeontology* and its subsequent revision.

In addition to his scientific achievements, Sir Alwyn was an outstanding committee man. He was a most skilful chairman, where his wit, Welsh eloquence and astute insight transformed many a gathering into a memorable, pleasurable occasion - even for those who did not get all they wanted! These gifts he not only deployed for the considerable benefit of the University of Glasgow and the Royal Society of Edinburgh, but for many other bodies, including the Scottish Agricultural Colleges and Scottish Hospitals Endowment Research Trust. He also played an important role in the development of the Scottish National Museums and the Williams Report on the National Museum of Antiquities helped shape their direction and subsequent transformation.

His scholarship and clear sense of vision, combined with the ability to translate this into convincing practical outcomes made him an inspirational leader. Although Welsh by birth and education, he long regarded Scotland, and especially Glasgow, as his true home where he will be sadly missed by many.

But no appreciation of Sir Alwyn would be complete without mentioning his remarkable wife, Joan, who so ably supported and encouraged him throughout 55 years of marriage. Individually they were delightful and most convivial company - together they were an unforgettable partnership. To her, their children Gareth and Sian, sincere sympathies on their great loss.

Sir Alwyn Williams

Slim and slight of build, Alwyn Williams would have been easy to overlook - until he spoke. His charismatic Welsh voice generated elegant prose and persuasive argument. It exuded power and authority. His piercing green-blue eyes mostly danced with mischief and charm but if the occasion warranted they would rapidly change into a disconcerting steely gaze. He was nobody's fool.

Alwyn was born in Aberdare, South Wales in 1921. He was an outstanding pupil at Aberdare Boy's Grammar School and a talented rugby player, until an attack of tuberculosis in 1939 kept him in a sanatorium for over a year. He lost one lung in the process. Thwarted in his initial intention to join the Fleet Air Arm, he gained an open scholarship to the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, and a first-class degree in geology in 1943. The college produced few, but outstanding graduates. For his PhD, Williams mapped Palaeozoic rocks in Wales and described new species of fossils – especially brachiopods. These small 'lamp-shells' were to fascinate him for the rest of his life. As his external examiner Professor O.T. Jones had mapped the adjoining territory it required a joint field excursion to reach a compromise! A Harkness Fund Fellowship to the National Museum of Natural History in Washington D.C. in 1948-50 led him to join a fellow workaholic, the legendary palaeontologist G. Arthur Cooper. Four years as a lecturer at Glasgow (1950-54), where he demonstrated his abilities as an inspiring teacher were followed by rapid advancement to the Chair of Geology at Queen's University, Belfast in 1954 at the tender age of 33. He remained there for 20 years, the last seven as Pro-Vice-Chancellor.

In a powerful address to graduates in 1972 he referred to the troubled community of Northern Ireland and identified a major cause - the dual educational school system. I quote: '...had these two groups of children been rich and poor or black and white, every syndicated columnist in America, every literate liberal in Europe, every racial moralist in the world and all the Churches in Christendom would have forthrightly identified such segregation as a flaw in our society. In terms of its educational system then, Northern Ireland, to put it bluntly, is the Alabama of Europe; and if desegregation of schools is accepted elsewhere in the world as one of the cures for racial discrimination and social injustice, it is time we started thinking about it here'. Forceful words – as was his habit. In addition to his responsibilities as Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Head of the Geology Department he continued research on stratigraphy and palaeontology in Wales and the Southern Uplands of Scotland.

He was appointed to the recently named Lapworth Chair and Head of the Department of Geological Sciences at Birmingham in 1974, and two years later was offered the Principalship of Glasgow University. He told me later that life during the troubled times in Northern Ireland made his job as Principal of the University of Glasgow seem relatively peaceful! He had returned to what he later came to consider his *alma mater*. Facing him was the need to modernise the university and develop computing and technology. He set out a tough and decisive programme of rationalisation, emphasizing the need for good teaching and research. On one occasion he pointed out firmly to the members of one laid-back department, nervously assembled under his three-line whip at 8.30 one morning, that he had published more research papers in the preceding year than the lot of them put together. He was a superb academic leader who really ran the University, although he encountered stiff opposition when he suggested selling some of the University's collection of Whistler paintings in order to help finances.

His outstanding flair as a chairman led to his appointment as President of the Palaeontological Association (1968-70), Trustee (1971-79) of the British Museum (Natural History) and its Chairman (1974-79), Vice-Chairman (1979-81) of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, President of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (1985-88), Chairman of the Committee on Scottish Agricultural Colleges (1989), Chairman (1989-96) of the Scottish Hospitals Endowments Research Trust, and membership of numerous NERC and UGC committees. He became Chairman of the Committee on the National Museums and Galleries of Scotland in 1979. The resulting 1981 Williams Committee Report, *A Heritage for Scotland*, recommended that a new museum of Scotland should be built, based on the collections of the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh. The stunning new National Museum of Scotland was opened in Edinburgh in 1999. Less enjoyable was his non-executive Directorship (1984-90) of the *Scottish Daily Record* and *Sunday Mail* Limited owned by Robert Maxwell.

Fellowship of the Royal Society, the Royal Society of Edinburgh, Membership of the Royal Irish Academy and honorary degrees from Belfast, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Paisley, Oxford, Strathclyde and Wales acclaimed his success as both scientist and administrator. Further recognition came from The Geological Society (the Bigsby and Murchison Medals), the Edinburgh Geological Society (the Clough Medal), and the Palaeontological Society (the Lapworth Medal), for his outstanding research work. He was knighted in 1983.

Alwyn retired as Principal in 1988 and at one of the university parties given in his honour, he and his wife responded to shouts of 'Geez us a song' by singing *I belong to Glasgow*. The city really had become their *alma mater*. Now freed from other responsibilities for the first time since his student days he was able to devote his full time to research – his passion and his recreation. He had worked a 16-hour day as Principal

at Glasgow, pursuing research early in the morning before beginning his normal day's work. After he retired he was awarded grants to create a Palaeobiology Unit within the University so that he could continue to work on the molecular shell structure of his beloved lamp-shells.

Dr Robin Cocks of the British Museum (Natural History), wrote: 'He was a giant among brachiopod workers, being not only the editor and first author of the first brachiopod *Treatise on Invertebrate Palaeontology* (two volumes) in 1965, but fulfilled the same roles in the second edition: four volumes of which have been published (1997-2003), and there are another two in press. He successfully organised contributions from 43 co-authors for the second edition, an enormous political challenge which he tackled with a characteristic mixture of charm, tenacity and efficiency. But the originality of his brachiopod work was also outstanding; he was the first to evaluate shell structure across the whole phylum through pioneer electron microscopy; he was amongst the first to undertake DNA studies; over his long career he published and refined many times the overall classification of the Brachiopoda, with the end product of a robust and well-known phylogeny that will probably require little future change. His systematic work, although originally on Silurian faunas (he was the first to recognise and document the evolution of *Stricklandia*, a key zone fossil) was chiefly concerned with the Ordovician. His substantial and painstaking memoirs and monographs on the Ordovician brachiopods on central and northern Wales, Shropshire and Girvan, as well as many smaller papers, will stand for a long time. For many of these areas he also remapped the often difficult geology, and published correlation data. He was the lead author of the 1973 Ordovician correlation chart of Britain and Ireland, and the first Chairman of the IUGS Ordovician Subcommittee'.

Increasingly severe macular degeneration forced him to use large computer monitors and giant hand-lenses. He taught himself to touch-type and recounted with great glee one message from his friendly Apple Mac typing tutorial 'Well done Alwyn'. Since 1999 he had been the author or co-author of 23 publications on brachiopods. When he learned that he had lung cancer he told his secretary to write to all of his contributors to shorten their deadline date. Just before he died he said to the consultant 'I need another four years to complete my research' and got the gentle response 'I can't guarantee that'.

Alwyn Williams married his Welsh fiancée Joan Bevan in Toronto in 1949. In every sense it was a wonderful partnership. Both were excellent hosts, loved good conversation and added greatly to social cohesion in the University and the city of Glasgow at large. Joan survives him as does their son Gareth, their daughter Sian and five grandchildren.

This obituary is compiled from fond and sometimes piquant memories of friends and colleagues of Alwyn. May I record in particular my thanks to Douglas Bassett, Robin Cocks, William Duncan, Laurie Hunter, Bernard Leake, Patricia Peters, Ian Rolfe, Andrew Skinner, and Annie Vaz.

Gordon Y Craig

Sir Alwyn Williams BSc, PhD (Wales), FRS, MRIA. Born 8th June 1921; elected FRSE 3 March 1958; died 4th April 2004.

RSE Council Service: President, 1985-88