W. H. C. (Bill) RAMSBOTTOM (1926–2004)

Bill Ramsbottom, one of the greatest names in Carboniferous geology of the 20th century, not just in Britain but throughout the world, died at Kirby Malzeard in Nidderdale on the 31st October, 2004.

Bill was born in Salford in 1926, but grew up in Yorkshire, a county that he loved. He graduated from Clare College, Cambridge, in 1947, and in the same year joined the Geological Survey in London. He completed his doctoral dissertation on Lower Palaeozoic crinoids at Chelsea Polytechnic College (University of London) in 1954. A monograph of Ordovician crinoids was duly published, but although some of the results of his work on Silurian forms also appeared in several journals, much important work on echinoderms from this period remained unpublished at the time of his death.

He moved to the Leeds Geological Survey Office in 1958, and purchased a house in Collingham, near Wetherby, close to the home of W. S. Bisat, F.R.S., the pioneering worker on the Carboniferous ammonoids of northern England and their use in bio- and chronostratigraphy. This coincidental but happy juxtaposition of great minds proved of particular benefit to Bill since, because of the requirements of his official duties, the principal objects of his researches had changed from Lower Palaeozoic echinoderms to Carboniferous stratigraphy and biostratigraphy. As a result of this move, many seminal papers and biostratigraphical contributions to numerous Survey memoirs and publications resulted, and it is for his Carboniferous work that he was best known and will be long remembered. Like his mentor Bisat, his name is synonymous with Carboniferous ammonoid biostratigraphy and chronostratigraphy. However, Bill had an encyclopaedic knowledge of other fossil groups prominent in the British Carboniferous, notably corals, brachiopods and, towards the end of his working life, foraminifera. In 1973, he was promoted to a ‘Special Merit’ position in the Survey, which permitted him to concentrate full time on his own studies and freed him from the discipline of assisting in sheet survey. In 1980, he was appointed Chief Palaeontologist.

Bill’s office was a bewildering mass of fossil specimens and piles of papers and books, all piled up apparently in no particular order. In fact, Bill knew the stratigraphy of these deposits well, and was usually able to find what he was looking for with little difficulty, even at the bottom of the heap. The volume of material in the room reflected the range and depths of his interests, and he was a great synthesizer of data acquired from these wide-ranging sources. In this, his involvement with much of the Survey’s then considerable investigation of Carboniferous rocks proved a major asset. Although he was often thought of as simply a ‘fossil man’, his studies were in fact less interested in systematic palaeontology than in how biostratigraphical collecting could be linked with lithostratigraphy, sedimentology and tectonics to create a greater overall understanding. Thus, he saw much (if not all) of the British Carboniferous sequence as comprising a series of widely correlatable contemporaneous packages of strata (mesothems) formed in response to sea-level shifts. These ideas, which were presented in some detail in two papers in the Proceedings, anticipated modern views of sequence stratigraphy, and came to provide a framework for the British Carboniferous that was subsequently applied internationally.

He was a great supporter of other worker’s investigations of the Carboniferous, and many colleagues and research students benefited from his advice and identification of their fossils. He was a keen advocate of bringing together researchers in other aspects of the earth sciences and from a wide range of countries. Notable in this respect, Bill was the driving force behind the Palaeontological Association field meetings that were held annually for many years during the 1970s and early 1980s to examine key areas in Carboniferous stratigraphy in Great Britain, Ireland and western Europe. Many significant advances in understanding of the Carboniferous of western Europe resulted from the numerous important contacts made at these meetings by researchers who otherwise would not normally have met or corresponded.

Bill was a co-founder of the Palaeontological Association (serving as President, 1980–82) and was a trustee of the Palaeontographical Society. He served on the Subcommission on Carboniferous Stratigraphy and was its Chair for many years. A major objective of the Subcommission at that time was to try to bring some sort of consensus to the then-boiling deliberations over Carboniferous subdivisions and boundary selection. What began as Working Group ‘discussions’ often ended as shouting matches. Throughout, Bill had a remarkable ability to restore calm, reason and direction to these meetings and the Subcommission made much headway during his Chairmanship. In 1981, he co-organized a symposium and field meeting based in Leeds, to permit respective specialists to synthesize all available biostratigraphical data for the Mid-Carboniferous, in an effort to try to agree on a choice for the Mid-Carboniferous boundary. Recent agreements on the international classification of the Carboniferous, referred to elsewhere in this volume, owe much to Bill’s pioneering efforts.

Throughout much of his career Bill was an enthusiastic supporter of the Yorkshire Geological Society, which he joined in 1954. He participated in many meetings and field excursions, published some of his most important contributions in the Proceedings, and served for several years on Council. He was awarded the Phillips Medal in 1972, and was President in 1975–76. He was the author of the Dinantian and Namurian sections of the Society’s publication, The geology and mineral resources of Yorkshire.
The 1980s saw the gradual closure of the Survey’s Leeds Office and the transfer of staff to Keyworth, Nottingham. In 1984, rather than move from Yorkshire, Bill elected to take early retirement. In retirement, Bill moved to Kirkby Malzeard, where he began to experiment with nasturtiums. He undertook a number of crossing experiments with different lines of this plant, including variants from South America, obtained during four visits there. At the same time, the stone barn at the rear of his cottage served as a workshop where he both designed and manufactured grandfather-sized, weight-driven clocks with wooden gears, which he also designed and machined himself from exotic hardwoods. His mind was tireless. During his retirement, he also undertook to make a computer-catalogue of Carboniferous foraminifera, and taught part time in the graduate programmes at the universities of Sheffield and Hull. In later years, though his health was beginning to fail, he remained the consummate host, gentleman and good friend, and an excellent cook. His scientific accomplishments will long continue to speak for themselves.

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