

OBITUARY NOTICES

William Howson Wilcockson, M.A., F.G.S.

Many geologists, professional and amateur, will have felt as I did a sense of personal loss when they learned of the death, on 29th October 1976, of the subject of this notice.

William Howson Wilcockson was born on the 15th April 1891, the son of a Cheshire clergyman. After attending school at Alderley Edge he went to Repton, then under the headmastership of William Temple, who was later to become Archbishop of Canterbury. In view of these influences it is small wonder that, when he went as Exhibitioner and prizeman to Caius College, Cambridge, it was his intent to read Divinity with a view to ordination. There he became engrossed by the lectures in geology given by Thomas McKenny Hughes and decided instead on a career in science. His studies were so effective that he gained a double first in the tripos and was awarded the Harkness Scholarship in geology.

His career, like that of so many others, was interrupted by the First World War, during which he served for a time as scientific expert at the War Office. In 1919, however, he was appointed to the academic staff of the University of Sheffield, beginning an association that was to last for 37 years.

The Head of the Sheffield Department was also a Cambridge graduate, William George Fearnside. Fearnside had married the daughter of W. W. Watts, Professor at Imperial College, London and his external examiner at Cambridge; his career was very much influenced by Watts and he retained strong links with Cambridge throughout his life - stronger indeed, one feels, than he ever forged with the Sheffield Department that came under his charge. There can be no doubt that Mr. Wilcockson owed his appointment to Fearnside's Cambridge connexions; there can equally be little question that his career was to be influenced adversely by the fact that Professor Fearnside was so often away at Cambridge or on consulting jobs, leaving Mr. Wilcockson to run the Department in his stead. Wilcockson's first official spell as Acting Head came in 1921-22, but he was to be officially in charge for several subsequent shorter periods and unofficially so whenever the Professor was away, which became increasingly often as his consulting practice grew.

In Wilcockson's early years at Sheffield, the Department of Geology was small and it was necessary for him to present an unusually broad range of courses, indeed he lectured on just about every aspect of geology, not always perhaps with equal competence but always responsibly and with humour. University classes he taught included students from Pure Science, Mining and Civil Engineering, and Metallurgy; but he also taught, for 47 years, evening classes in geology in Sheffield and in several towns and villages in Derbyshire. He also did much to stimulate the interest of amateurs in geology through his long association with the Sorby Natural History Society and Yorkshire Geological Society, leading or participating in excursions to many parts of England, Wales and Scotland. He acted as leader of an East Midlands Geological Society excursion to Edale in 1966 (see *Mercian Geologist*, Vol.2, p. 109-110, pl. 5, which includes a portrait).

That these heavy other duties, whether assigned to him by his superior or assumed voluntarily, adversely affected Mr. Wilcockson's opportunities for research there can be no question; but of the quality of the work he did manage to complete there can be equally little question. His studies were wide ranging, embracing stratigraphy, petrology and economic geology. His earliest work, done at Cambridge in association with R. H. Rastall, was a study of the accessory minerals in the Lake District granites; this was undertaken to establish sound foundations for the heavy-mineral analyses of sediments that were then beginning. Subsequently he undertook, at first alone and later with the help of a team of Cambridge students headed by W. B. R. King, the mapping of the pre-Carboniferous rocks of the Austwick district of Yorkshire. He also wrote on serpentines from the Sudan; made valuable compilations of records of the sections of the strata of the Yorkshire coalfield; and wrote an account of the life of that scientific polymath, Henry Clifton Sorby, in whose honour the Sheffield University Professorship in Geology was named. The quality of Wilcockson's researches was recognised in two

awards from the Geological Society of London: the Lyell Fund in 1931 and the J. B. Tyrrell Fund in 1935, the latter enabling him to study the syenitic rocks of the Haliburton-Bancroft region of Ontario and to travel to the Rockies of Alberta and British Columbia.

His academic life was interrupted when the Department was temporarily closed in the Second World War (1939-1943); during this time, he served as a postal censor. A more significant event, perhaps, was the retirement of Professor Fearnside in 1945; his interest in his Department had long waned and a "new broom" was needed. His successor, F. W. Shotton, did not stay long; and it was only when Leslie R. Moore became third Sorby Professor that energetic changes were made and the Department began to emerge from its early-20th-century twilight into the modern age. Mr. Wilcockson's contributions, not only during the long period of housekeeping under Fearnside but also to these necessary changes, were recognised by his promotion to Reader in 1949. His energy and interest were aroused when the Department developed an interest in the igneous geology of East Africa; at the age of 62, he led the first Sheffield University expedition to Kilimanjaro, ascending that 19,340 foot peak. Four years later, on a second expedition, he remained fit enough to work on geological problems up to 15,000 feet under very arduous conditions - no mean feat for a 66 year old but one that will be readily understood by EMGS members who remember his energy on the steep slopes of Edale when 75 !

His strongly Christian principles were expressed in many other endeavours. He served on several University Committees, as Staff Treasurer for the Students Union (1924-1939) and as a founder and longtime supporter of the University Anglican Society. He was for many years Churchwarden of St. Marks, Broomhill, helping the church to overcome the problems it encountered as a result of wartime bombing. He was long associated with the Derbyshire Naturalists' Trust, (serving as its Secretary), the Peak Park Planning Board and the Council for the Preservation of Rural England. His services were recognised by election to Honorary Membership of the Yorkshire Geological Society in 1965 and by the naming by the Nature Conservancy Council in 1971 of the "William Howson Wilcockson Nature Reserve" at Duckmanton, Derbyshire, in his memory.

Like many before him, he married one of his students, Marjorie Marie Wilcockson. They had a long and very happy life together, their two children Helen and Richard Howson, being born respectively in 1933 and 1937.

I am one of many geologists who is deeply indebted to Mr. Wilcockson for his encouragement and teaching. Like so many others, I will remember his kindness, his charity and gentleness, and the inspiration of his own deep interest in my chosen subject. Many geologists make their prime mark on science through their own researches; but Mr. Wilcockson was one of those generous few who give up their own work in order to help and inspire others. The scientific fruits of their work may be less obvious, but they are perhaps even more important.

I am indebted to Mr. Peter Wilkinson, to the Secretaries of the Geological Society of London and the Yorkshire Geological Society, and to the Registrar of the University of Sheffield for furnishing the data on which this notice is based.

William A. S. Sarjeant.