

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

THE LATE LORD ENERGLYN: SOME REMINISCENCES

Dear Sir,

I read with interest the two obituary notices by Brian Elliott (1986a, b) of Lord Energlyn. I would like to amplify these by adding some personal impressions and reminiscences of a person so important to the geological history of the East Midlands in general and the University of Nottingham in particular.

Lord Energlyn was an exciting and stimulating person to work under, in part because of his originality and freshness of thought and in part because of his sheer unpredictability.

To those of us who are not Celts, Lord Energlyn seemed a classic example of the Celtic temperament, ranging from one day to another between peaks of inspiration and troughs of depression. On a black day, it would seem to him that geology had made no real advances since Murchison; that we were all wasting our time and that our research was going nowhere. If one ventured to approach him with any request, it would be examined critically, even with hostility. Inevitably it would be turned down, either because Lord Energlyn thought he perceived some flaw in one's reasoning for making it or because he had no funds, or felt he had no funds, with which to support it. On such days he would take coffee alone in his office, and woe betide anyone who crossed his threshold!

However, as one came to know him, one realized that such days were more than compensated for by those many other days of high spirits—the days when new discoveries were just around the corner, when we Nottingham geologists seemed to him right in the forefront of geological research, and when any request—even if it had been advanced before and rejected, provided one could marshal new arguments in its support—would be given enthusiastic endorsement. On those days, funds seem never to be a problem; and, if there were to be a day of reckoning later when matters might need to be straightened out, it was too far ahead to cast any cloud over the present bright skies.

These were the days when he would join his colleagues in the coffee room and keep us vastly entertained with his reminiscences and stories. His voice, with that educated Welsh accent, always detectable but never obtrusive, was vivid and flexible. Moreover he enjoyed enormously, and usually excelled in, the rôle of raconteur.

One story in particular that I remember concerned a small Welsh seaside resort—was it Aberdovey?—where tourists, by careful searching, might find agates on the beach. They would take these along to a local jewelry store, which advertized the polishing and mounting of such stones. The jeweller would examine the find, croon over it, say it would make a beautiful brooch or pendant if cut properly, and promise to have it ready within just a couple of days. When the tourist returned, he would be handed an exquisitely cut and mounted stone, pay the cost and go away very happily.

Little did the tourist know the truth; that, after he had left, the jeweller would reach under the counter for a box of ready polished German agates; sort through it until he found one which, in size and colour banding, more or less matched the tourist's find; mount this in whatever fashion had been requested and sell it to the tourist. After which, the original agate pebble would be returned to the beach, hopefully to be found and brought in for mounting by some other tourist!

Concerning Lord Energlyn's originality of thought, there are many examples one might add to those which Dr. Elliott quoted. There was his modified design for a microscope camera attachment, which brought in a steady trickle of funds to the Department over many years. There was the radioactive lightning conductor, a design which came to be used on quite a few U.S. skyscrapers. Dr. Elliott mentioned Lord Energlyn's work on mine dusts and its relation to pneumoconiosis; I can add to this that Lord Energlyn was the first to suggest that coals (usually fusains) with a high concentration of fossil spores might correlate with an unusual severity of this lung condition among miners—an interesting parallel with the modern allergies to pollen in the air that cause hay-

fever—and that the incidence of this condition might also be related to the shape and density of quartz grains in the dust, the more pointed grains worsening the condition. (Both ideas led to fruitful research by others, though neither proved wholly correct). Also worthy of mention is Lord Energlyn's idea of applying petrological thin-sectioning techniques to the study of mineral deposits in human organs and tissues, an idea amply followed up by medical researchers.

A matter that attracted much publicity for a time was Lord Energlyn's use of modern prospecting techniques in the search for King John's treasure, supposedly lost among the shifting sands of The Wash. Many of us felt, when he failed to find it, that the reason was not some error in technique, but the fact that the treasure had never been there, having instead been disposed of elsewhere by that wily monarch or some corrupt minion!

Lord Energlyn was always careful in his handling of press publicity. He told, as reason, the story of when, during a press conference to announce a Departmental expedition to Iceland, a reporter had asked him; "Will you be looking for any radioactive minerals?" He had replied, naturally enough: "Well, we'll make a note of any that we come across"—but that innocent answer was perverted by the reporter into a headline item "EXPEDITION TO SEARCH FOR RADIOACTIVE MINERALS IN ICELAND". In consequence, the Icelandic Government was annoyed enough to withdraw permission for the expedition, this being only regained after a hasty flight to Reykjavik by Lord Energlyn and much pacificatory explanation.

Much more amusing was the occasion when a Nottingham citizen, accompanied by a reporter, brought in a mammoth tooth for identification. Mr. Alec Honeyman and I were called in to confirm the identification and he, I and the then David Evans were photographed with the tooth. Asked to comment on the find, we stated that its only unusual feature was its small size. What was our embarrassment when the Nottingham Post published an excellent photograph under the headline "WAS THIS A MINI-MAMMOTH"? For a while, the three of us were known as "the mini-mammoth men"!

It was Lord Energlyn who designed the original emblem for Hoveringham Gravel, a very spirited mammoth—a much nicer animal altogether than that curious "stratified mammoth" which the company has been using more recently as its emblem! Lord Energlyn was also a very competent painter in oils. Among other examples of his work was the excellent portrait of Harold Wilson that hung in his office.

His generally good relations with the press, and his originality of thought, gained for him much media attention and aided him in his quest for funds to develop research in the Department. Yet Lord Energlyn's very fertility of ideas could backfire upon him professionally. It made him, for example, impatient with research that did not produce results quickly—say, within six months or a year, for by that time his mind would be full of some more novel idea and he would be no longer much interested in the earlier one. His original approach to the age-dating of rocks might not have worked ultimately; all one can say is that, since it did not do so in the relatively short term devoted to its development by his technician and he, it was abandoned. When I arrived at Nottingham and was seeking to concentrate dinoflagellate cysts from ancient sediments, Lord Energlyn was worried by the dangers involved in the existing techniques of extraction. (Hydrofluoric acid, an essential reagent, is indeed one of the most dangerous of chemical substances). Seeking an alternative, he experimented with froth flotation methods. However, though these on one occasion produced a concentration of calcispheres, a group of micro-organisms of enigmatic character, he could not attain the pure concentration of palynomorphs for which he was striving and soon abandoned these researches. Now that we have become aware that many calcispheres are in fact calcareous dinoflagellate cysts, I would give much to have the notes of his experiments; but, alas! they have long since been thrown in the wastebasket.

A second problem for him was that, very often, his fount of ideas poured forth so fast that it outstripped his knowledge of basic data. Visiting specialists of the stuffer sort would seize upon some minor error of fact and would be so disturbed by, even contemptuous of, it that they would not perceive the originality of the ideas being presented to them. I remember, for example, Lord Energlyn lamenting the decline in students' practical knowledge and saying "Every student should be able, in the field, to recognize a terebratulid lamellibranch!" Well, of course, that was an amusing confusion of two invertebrate phyla, but it did not in any way invalidate the concept that Lord Energlyn was expressing. Those geologists who regarded such minor blunders as reflecting upon his research abilities and astuteness were usually persons who laboured in a much narrower research groove, without any fraction of Lord Energlyn's imagination. They did not perceive that it was the ideas that were important; the details could always be checked later.

Of all the geologists I knew, Lord Energlyn was the one who, I felt, was most likely to make one of those advances that have changed the whole pattern of growth of geology. However, though he made important contributions (direct or indirect) to a wide range of fields, he did not achieve this. I shall always wonder whether, had he stayed longer with one or other of his ideas—or had he found a research assistant able and willing to press on with some project after Lord Energlyn's own enthusiasm had cooled—he might have made such an advance. Alas! we can never know now.

Lord Energlyn was a person of wide sympathies. It seems somewhat curious, therefore, that the Department should have been run so much like a military establishment. As colonel-in-command, Lord Energlyn believed he must maintain some distance from his colleagues: since he was gregarious by nature, this was a conscious decision and one which, I think, had caused him some heart-searching. The lecturing staff formed a sort of officers' mess, with a clear separation between its senior members, with whom Lord Energlyn was on close office-visiting terms, and the junior members like myself, who knew themselves to be definitely one step down. Mr. Roy Hendry, the Chief Technician, and the successive Departmental Secretaries were the non-commissioned officers; the other technicians and secretaries were the corporals; and the students were the privates, the 'men' as it were.

I did not perceive how hierarchical was the set-up until it was brought home to me by a U.S. visiting professor, Dr. Alexander Ospovat, who was much amused by a scene on the staircase one day. I was walking down when I encountered a technician. Automatically he stood aside respectfully while I passed; but when I met Lord Energlyn coming up, I stood aside equally automatically while he passed!

That was the way it was. Of the lecturing staff, only your editor, Dr. Firman, broke the barriers between the senior and junior lecturers, with his originality and sense of mischief; and I was almost the only lecturer who would regularly attend the functions held by the technicians and secretarial staff. For any of us, an invitation to Lord Energlyn's home was an extremely rare event; and, for my part, I was never to receive one in nine years. Consequently I rarely met, and can scarcely claim to have known, his gracious wife Lady Energlyn.

My own relationship with Lord Energlyn had begun rather oddly. I was invited up to the University of Nottingham for interview in the late summer of 1961. When I arrived, I was called into his office before the formal interviews and talked to very pleasantly, being assured of Lord Energlyn's deep interest in my researches and that, whatever happened in the interview, he wished to keep in close touch with their development. I left his office pretty clear in mind that I was not going to be appointed and, in consequence, decidedly depressed. As a second consequence, I was particularly relaxed in the interview—not anticipating success—and was quite astonished, as well as delighted, when I was offered the position! Naturally, I accepted.

Only later did I learn that my deductions had been correct; Lord Energlyn had indeed intended, and expected, that the post would be offered to another candidate. However, that candidate had made so poor an impression on the interviewing committee that he did not gain the appointment.

If Lord Energlyn regretted this in any way, it was never evident to me. From my first coming to Nottingham, he treated me well and with consideration. I shall never forget his sympathy in the difficult time of the collapse of my first marriage; nor indeed, the tact of my other colleagues, who kept the matter so discreetly confidential that, even a year afterwards, the Chief Technician of the Department was still not aware of that grievous happening. Nor shall I forget Lord Energlyn's kindness a year later, when I was deeply depressed and on drugs. He summoned me into his office; told me he was concerned about me and believed I required a spell of recuperation in different surroundings, preferably abroad; and he positively ordered me to find a research justification for such a journey. Then he found travel funds, not only for me but also for a companion, since he felt correctly that I was in no fit state to travel alone. The three weeks I spent in the sunshine of central and southern France with my good friend David Spalding were indeed a turning-point for me and set me on the path to recovery of mental and emotional balance.

I remember with admiration his sensitive handling of the difficult affair of a student involved in peculations from the Department and its political aftermath. Then there was that other occasion when a fire severely damaged the new Geology building. Not only did Lord Energlyn lead us firmly and sympathetically through the tough year of reconstruction that followed, but also his efforts ensured that the University and the British research community rallied to our support. Consequently, the difficult task of rebuilding our laboratories and recommencing our researches after so severe a setback was achieved with remarkable speed.

Whilst at Nottingham, I was unable properly to express in any satisfactory fashion my gratitude to Lord Energlyn, without risking the accusation of sycophantry. It was a pleasure, therefore, after I had immigrated to Canada, for me to be able to name a newly discovered East Midlands dinoflagellate genus *Energlynia* (1976) and to learn, from a letter, how much Lord Energlyn had appreciated this tribute.

As Dr. Elliott noted, the firm support we received from Lord Energlyn was important to the development of this Society. When Dr. Frank Taylor and I, having conceived the idea that the East Midlands should have a geological society, approached the then Prof. William David Evans about it, he was from the outset both enthusiastic and supportive. In giving us this support, indeed, he overrode the unenthusiasm of several of his senior colleagues, one of whom even expressed the view that we, as professionals, should not be encouraging amateurs to 'mess around' in our science! Despite such opposition (active or passive), Lord Energlyn not only encouraged the new Society to meet in the Department, but also gave me a great deal of useful advice and direct assistance when, as first Editor, I was striving to establish *The Mercian Geologist*. The Department's guaranteed purchase of copies for use in literature exchanges with other Universities and research laboratories was, indeed, its financial foundation.

We were all of us startled, but delighted, when William David Evans was elevated to the peerage, as Lord Energlyn of Caerphilly—the only geologist, as Dr. Elliott has commented, to be so honoured in this century. We shared something of his pleasure at the privileges this brought in train—the securing of the House of Lords Motor Club plates to his little car, so unpretentious a vehicle for a peer; the granting of his coat-of-arms, appropriately incorporating the leaning tower of Caerphilly Castle and a green quartz crystal; his participation in the investiture of Charles, Duke of Cornwall, as Prince of Wales; and his increasing involvement in important national committees and commissions. Though discreet whenever discretion was necessary, Lord Energlyn told us much about his doings. Indeed, he tended to join us more often in the coffee-room after his peerage had been granted than beforehand. His ebullient recountings of his experiences enlivened many a dull winter afternoon.

Though it is almost fifteen years since low British salaries and worsening support for scientific research caused me to leave Britain, my memories of Nottingham are undimmed. I shall always remember Lord Energlyn with gratitude and affectionate regard. I trust that these reminiscences may help others to remember and understand a very talented, human and humane individual.

Yours sincerely,

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References

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