Recollections of Professor Ian Reid

I first met Alistair in October 1965 - I'd registered at the University of Hull to read for a degree in geography and at this stage in our relationship - me a wet-behind-the-ears 18 year-old - he was addressed formally as Dr Pitty.

As an undergraduate, I must occasionally have caused him pain, especially during field classes. It was within weeks of starting my degree course that, on a day trip, exasperated by my continual, unnecessary banter, he handed me the megaphone, inviting me to address the 100 or so undergraduates! And, later, in my second year and on a field class to central Wales, deciding we'd play a prank and move the minibus from where he'd parked it, his heart must have been in his mouth as he watched horrified from the hillside above as the minibus slid down the road, apparently out of control. Memory fails me when I try to recall the nature of the reprimand!

So, it was with great surprise when, in the summer of 1968, having graduated, I received a hand-written letter from Alistair which invited me to apply for a research studentship that was available in the Department of Geography at the University of Hull. He suggested that the topic might well involve soil hydrology and he would supervise.

Was this an offer I couldn't refuse? Had I been forgiven for the various misdemeanours of my days as an undergraduate? I was just about to start a postgraduate certificate of education with the intent of becoming a teacher and Alistair was offering a move into the world of academic research and an unknown future.

Well, my admiration for him and his published research meant that I abandoned previous plans and took up his offer of supervision. And, three years later, the reward, for me, was appointment to a lectureship and a very fulfilling life as an academic.

So, I have everything to thank Alistair for. He was not the easiest of supervisors! – quirky and sometimes dismissive. But he knew how to dispel my self-doubt and goad me on to complete my thesis. And, later, to be more than generous in offering advice about avoiding the pitfalls of life as a young academic whenever it was needed.

Our meetings have been less frequent in recent years, especially since he became more infirm. But, he was a part of my life for nearly 60 years and, of him, I have the fondest of memories.

A lovely man and much loved!

Professor Ian Reid
July 2024

Email from Alice to Ian:

For the last two summers I spent weeks sifting through my father's voluminous shelves of files and sorting the research wheat from the chaff. I think I've found more or less all of his academic and commercial research publications. Sadly, I seem to have misplaced a handful of old brown-coloured offprints from an article published in Nature around 1971 on the Saharan dust (taking samples from the car windscreens in Hull Uni car park). It is easy enough to find the article online but I can no longer find the originals.

Ian's Reply

I remember the incident about the Saharan dust clearly. It was as much to do with the fact that Alistair had had bought for him a new grain-size analyser, known as a Coulter Counter - expensive at the time for the Geography Department and probably the only one in geography departments countrywide. Alistair was very proud and excited about the analyser.

The dust arrived. There hadn't been another such event, at least in living memory, and, if my memory serves me, there was a degree of speculation about where it had come from and some expressing doubts about its origin from as far off as the Sahara. Your Dad had had the (good) idea of collecting some samples and using his brand new Coulter Counter to analyse the grain size of the dust.

He'd gone into the car park that fronts the University. He reported that he'd been able to identify only those cars that had been washed by the owners the day before. There was, therefore, no difficulty with contamination; the samples were pure Saharan.

Now, the relationship between postgraduates and their supervisors is not necessarily one of unalloyed admiration and I recall there were some light-hearted but ungenerous comments about your Dad's ability to identify cars recently washed that were, at the time of sampling, covered in Saharan dust! This was, of course, backroom banter and he would not have known of it!

I have a memory of your Dad showing me the galley proof - vaguely recalled to be on blue or brown paper - certainly not white. And, a publication in Nature was - as it still is - very prestigious. So, we were very pleased and proud of your Dad. It probably justified having bought the Coulter Counter!

Update from Alice doing yet more sifting through the garage (August 2024)… I found one copy! Yey :) Is there a geomorphological process to describe this process of unearthing the buried strata of my father's life in hundreds of ring binders?

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Particle Size of the Saharan Dust which fell in Britain in July 1968

RAIN falling in Britain on July 1, 1968, brought down large quantities of dust which, according to Meteorological Office reports, had travelled northward from Morocco where unusually strong thermal currents had carried the dust to heights of up to 35,000 feet. Such occurrences are unusual in Britain, and the dustfall aroused considerable popular interest. It also provided a rare opportunity for studying the particle size and degree of sorting in a natural dust, known to be transported by wind, unaltered by post-depositional modifications, and unlikely to be the product of reworking of an existing loess deposit.

A sample of the red dust was collected in the University of Hull car park from the bonnets and roofs of vehicles that were clean before the dustfall. The sample was dispersed in an ultrasonic bath and the particle size distribution (Fig. 1) was obtained using a Coulter counter[1], giving a median grain size of 9μ and a quartile deviation sorting index of 0·62 phi units[2]. Although loess, or well sorted silt, is perhaps the most widespread of superficial deposits in the northern hemisphere[3], and there is a vast literature on the subject[4], both indices merit some brief comparison with existing studies because they describe the product of a contemporary geological process which is not often observed in operation.

The median grain is just below the lower limit of the range of particle sizes commonly quoted for loess deposits (Table 1) and well below the median values of typical individual samples (Table 2). In Britain, however, loess deposits appear to have fallen only a few kilometres from probable source areas[14], and in Kansas distances of travel are usually less than 400 km[6]. The small size of the particles of the dustfall of July 1968 in Britain is clearly a result of the greater distance travelled (approximately 3,000 km), but because particles as small as 9μ could conceivably remain suspended in the air almost indefinitely, the particular size observed is unlikely to be an exact function of distance in the manner predicted by Krumbein[15]. The median size observed may also be in part related to the origin of the dust as a hot desert loess, as opposed to loess of glacial origin which is produced in large quantities by the pulverizing action of glaciers and by the frost-shattering of particles on periglacial outwash