
**PROFESSOR HUGH TORRENS
AWARDEE FOR 2000**

Hugh S. Torrens, History of Geology Division Award, Citation by William Brice

Mr. Chairman, officers of the Division, honored guests, members, and ladies and gentleman; once again we gather to honor a colleague for his long, and outstanding contribution to the field of history of geology, Professor Hugh S. Torrens of Keele University. Somehow it seems natural that paleontology should have been his first professional love, as it is such a historical science. He especially loved working with those beautiful, coiled ammonites of the Mesozoic. The fact that he is the generic and specific dedicatee of several ammonites speaks to his prominence in that field. But it is his dedication to and passion for the history of Geology that brings us all together here today. I must add that Hugh, often with little support and official recognition, expanded his interests well beyond the expected bounds of the subject to include the history of technology, especially investigations of the history of engineering, iron-making, steam power, and the internal combustion engine.

Professor Torrens completed his Bachelor of Arts at Oxford and his Ph.D. at the University of Leicester, and since October of 1967 he has been a member of the faculty at Keele University, where he attained his professorship in May of 1998. In addition he has served as a visiting professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz (1996); Eotvos Lorand University, Budapest Hungary (1997); and the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada (1998). In September of this year, Hugh obtained a goal that many of us in this room are seeking, whether we know it or not, for he retired and became Professor Emeritus. Our congratulations and we wish him a fulfilling retirement.

Hugh has produced over 200 books, papers, and articles and a brief look at some of the titles will provide a glimpse into the diversity of his interests and knowledge: "The stratigraphical distribution of Bathonian ammonites in Central England" (1969), "A Bathonian Crocodile new to Dorset" (1971), "Early maps of the Somersetshire Coal Canal" (1974), "The curious case of the FC Front-Drive Alvis" (1974), "The source of the lost Richard Owen lithograph" (1981), "Development of geology in Britain 1815-1840" (1982), "The history of coal prospecting in Britain 1650-1900" (1984), "The Stone Pipe Scandal. How competition bred a 19th century folly" (1988), "Hawking history - a vital future for Geology's past" (1988), "The transmission of ideas on the use of fossils in stratigraphic analysis from England to America 1800-1840" (1991), "When did the Dinosaur get its name?" (1992), "William Smith - the truth [about his wife] (1992), and "A study of 'failure' with a successful 'innovation' - Joseph Day and the two-stroke engine" (1992). Obviously, the list could go on, but I feel this will serve to illustrate the broad scope of his imagination, curiosity and the depth of his scholarship.

He has held various offices in such historically oriented organizations as: The Geological Curators' Group (Geological Society of London) (Chairman, 1976-80); The British Society for the History of Science (President, 1990-92); The International Commission on the History of Geological Sciences (President, 1996-2000); The History of Earth Sciences Society (Councilor, 1996-98), and The Comité Français d'Histoire de la Géologie (Conseiller étranger, 1991-92); just to mention a few.

However, I would like to draw attention to one area of his research that I feel deserves special mention, and that is his work on the life of Mary Anning (Torrens, 1981, 1995, 1997, 2000). She was neither the first nor the only woman whose accomplishments have come to light through his diligence, for of the more than 40 contributions that Hugh has prepared for the *New Dictionary of National Biography*, almost 20% have women subjects.

All of us, no doubt, have thought we know the story of Mary Anning; telling our classes that she collected fossils and that she was the subject of the old rhyme, "She sells sea shells down by the sea shore..." But generally, there it would end, and a giant in the field of paleontology would be reduced to the subject of a tongue-twisting rhyme. With the tenacity of a blood hound and a marvelous instinct for the historical trail, Hugh has been able to reconstruct the life of this extraordinary woman who left almost no written record of her own, and yet, she was a major figure in early paleontology, especially of Ichthyosaurs and Plesiosaurs. The story of finding her first Ichthyosaur at the age of 10 is true and is the subject of several children's books, but beyond that, most stories depart greatly from the truth. She was one of the few people of her age, other than perhaps William Smith, also one of Hugh's subjects, who actually made her living with her geology.

A few years ago, my wife, Heather, and I had a wonderful time in the small town of Lyme Regis, which was the home of Mary Anning, with Hugh as our tour guide. We visited the site of her fossil shop, now, thanks in large part to Hugh's involvement, a museum to her work. I shall never forget standing in front of the building in which Mary Anning died in 1847 at the age of 48, while Hugh told the story of her death and of the many inaccurate historical accounts of the last few years of her life. There are reports that she became a drunk and spent many of her last years "in her cups" as it were. Nothing could be farther from reality. Hugh discovered that Mary Anning suffered from a form of very painful breast cancer, and the only release from the pain was laudanum, a narcotic containing opium. No wonder she gave the impression of being "in her cups." But what a privilege it was to stand near the spot where she drew her last breath and hear the story from Hugh as though it had happened only yesterday. He made it so real that we all had tears in our eyes. We then climbed the hill to the churchyard and stood silently before her grave, each of us feeling as though we had lost a friend, and in a sense we had, for Hugh's insightful scholarship had made her live again, if only for a brief moment, in our minds and hearts. The full irony of her life struck us as we gazed at the beautiful stained glass window presented to the Lyme Regis church by the Geological Society and dedicated to her memory. It has a wonderful inscription across the bottom filled with laudatory words about her contribution to the betterment of society and her concern for the poor, but not one word about her contribution to geology and paleontology. Thanks to the work of our honoree for 2000, Hugh Torrens, we now know how much she contributed to our science.

One need look no farther than Hugh's own family to see the inspiration for his exploration into the contributions of women, for with him all these years has been his wife, Shirley, who has made her own special contribution to the Red Cross of Great Britain. We very much appreciate her understanding and acceptance of the fact that many times he was preoccupied with other women, even though they had been dead for many years. Sometimes, no doubt, she must have found it hard to compete with ghosts.

But any one who knows Hugh knows the depth of his feelings for the history of science; a passion that shows itself in his conversation, especially if one happens to be standing on one of his subjects as I was one afternoon in 1993. We were literally standing on the Iron Bridge at Trentham (Torrens, 1982) as he described for me its own history and how its construction marked the turning point in the use of modern building materials. I should add that the bridge was still in use as we spoke. On another occasion we stood before an outcrop of coal and sandstone exposed along the Guyandotte River in West Virginia as Hugh read the description of that exact same outcrop written by James Buckman in 1858. What a thrill to know that we were seeing the same rocks almost 150 years later. I must admit we both were deeply moved by this experience, and I was privileged to share this moment with Hugh.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Division, ladies and gentleman, in recognition of his many contributions to the history of geology, it is with great personal honor and pride that I present to you, my friend and colleague, Professor Hugh Torrens, the winner of the History of Geology Division Award for the year 2000.

References Cited:

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