

## **Professor R. J. G. Savage: an appreciation**

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Bob Savage retired in September, 1992 after 38 years on the staff of the Geology Department of the University of Bristol. His total span of service as a permanent university academic was 40 years, a figure unlikely to be equaled by newcomers to the field.

Bob was born in 1927 in Northern Ireland, a member of an old Ulster family that had held sway in the southern part of the Ards Peninsula, County Down, for centuries. Indeed, the name Savage is still common in the area. He recalls the massive antlers of an Irish elk, *Megaloceros*, mounted on the wall of the entrance hall to the family pile, and now in Queen's University Geology Department. This may have been the spur to his subsequent career in palaeomammalogy.

Bob was educated at Methodist College, Belfast, and at Wesley College, Dublin before and during the war years. He went straight to the Queen's University, Belfast where he graduated in Zoology (BSc, 1948) and with a first in Geology (BSc, 1949), a rare double achievement, but an ideal background for his studies in palaeontology. He was offered two research positions, one in Cambridge to work with Rex Parrington, and the other at University College, London, to work with D. M. S. Watson, then the grand old man of British vertebrate palaeontology. Bob turned Cambridge down, a fact that may seem astonishing to some, but entirely sensible to others, and pursued his PhD studies on the Oligocene otter *Potamotherium*, based on material from France, Switzerland, and Germany.

Bob obtained his first academic post, as Assistant Lecturer in Geology at Queen's, Belfast, in 1952, before he had finished his PhD. There, he was one of the new post-war intake of staff, a motley group brought in to assist the magisterial Professor Charlesworth build up the Department and see through its move to a large new building. The others were Jack Preston, an igneous petrologist, and Walther Schwarzacher, a carbonate sedimentologist. Bob was given the task of chief quantity surveyor and general factotum, and he personally designed the fine wooden storage cabinets which remain at Queen's.

Two years later, in 1954, Bob moved to Bristol as Curator of the Geology Museum, then being rearranged and properly housed, in the Queen's Building. He supervised the construction of a large number of storage cases with tightly-fitting drawers, pull-out shelves for consultation, and on many, glass-topped display areas. In this time were constructed also the large display cases, including that holding a fine sabretoothed cat from the Rancho La Brea tar pits.

Bob's post translated progressively into a lectureship and, at first, he taught most of the palaeontology, stratigraphy, and sedimentology courses. His notable researches in vertebrate palaeontology were marked in 1966 by the award of the title of Reader

and, in 1982, by conferment of a Personal Chair, and the title Professor of Vertebrate Palaeontology.

Bob Savage's research record has been impressive. In 1956 and 1959, he published two classic papers, with John Maynard Smith, on the biomechanics of locomotion and feeding, as well as reports on his thesis work, and on Pleistocene mammals from Ireland. After that, his work divided equally between major projects on African fossil mammals and reports on a huge range of 'local' issues—Mesozoic mammals and reptiles, even ammonites and fishes, from the south-west of England—as well as a steady trickle of reports on material from Ireland. During these years, he wrote numerous long reviews on African mammals, and a major achievement was the launch of the series, *Fossil Vertebrates of Africa*, which he edited over four volumes from 1970–1976. His recent book, *Mammal Evolution: an Illustrated Guide* (1986), is well-established as the leading work in its field, and has been translated into Spanish (1991) and Japanese (1991).

There is an element of the raffish gentleman explorer in much of Bob's career. Perhaps this was inevitable because of his surname. His 1986 book was illustrated by Michael Long, and hence is known as 'Savage and Long'. Bob had also written a paper in 1966 with Nick Large, referred to as 'Savage and Large'. With the name Savage, Bob had to become an explorer in the glorious British tradition of Professor Challenger who, in Arthur Conan Doyle's novel, *The Lost World*, travelled to an isolated plateau in South America to find live dinosaurs. Indeed, Bob may have been influenced by a slightly less distinguished work in the same genre, a series of adventures published as *Doc Savage* magazine, an American pulp. In one of these, *The Land of Terror*, published in 1933, Doc Savage, the man of bronze, and five stalwart companions, fly to Thunder Island, an extinct volcano, in search of a strange chemical element. They come upon a prehistoric world, populated by dinosaurs, but regrettably the whole lot is destroyed forever by molten lava.

Bob's career has taken him all over the world, and his travels started early. Coincident with his arrival in Bristol, Louis Leakey, the noted palaeoanthropologist, invited Bob to Kenya, and so began Bob's long association with Africa. Since 1955, he has participated in, or led, expeditions to Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, the Sahara, Libya), one to Persia, one to Israel, one to Russia, one to Australia, two to India, one to Venezuela, and one to Soviet Central Asia. In 1991, as a prelude to his retirement, and as a form of mild relaxation, Bob travelled through Patagonia to visit fossil mammal localities, and then drove from Pakistan over the Kunjerab Pass to Xinjiang, and eastward across the Takla Makan Desert to Xian and Beijing.

These expeditions have all been in pursuit of fossil mammals, and they yielded many tonnes of specimens which formed subjects for many of Bob's papers. He passed on his joy of travel to his 16 graduate students, seven of whom worked on African palaeontological problems.

Bob's main contributions to palaeontology are his series of reviews of African mammal faunas from Kenya and Libya, and his monographic descriptions of Oligocene and Miocene carnivores (the otter *Potamotherium*, Miocene carnivores of East Africa), the giant hyaenodont *Megistotherium*, and sirenian (sea cow) evolution. In recent years, he has established a parallel professional career in the study of historic gardens, and has published papers in this field.

Bob's service on local and national committees has also been extensive. He sits on the Council of the National Trust, where his expertise was in service in 1992 and 1993 as chairman of their enquiry into stag hunting. He also served on the Council

of Bristol Zoological Gardens. This gave him access to recently deceased exotica, some of which found their way on to his dissecting bench, others into his kitchen. An apocryphal tale concerns the time when he sampled some hippopotamus steak. He was asked what it tasted like . . . “Well, something like okapi” was his reply.

Bob has for years helped local societies, much to the benefit of geologists in the Bristol area. He has served on the committees of ten natural history, geological, archaeological and heritage societies in the area, and edited the *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society* from 1966 to 1988. He has also served on the committees of several national palaeontological and biological societies. One of his proudest achievements, however, was the joint Geology/Zoology (now Geology/Biology) School, a joint degree course at the University of Bristol, which he founded in 1968, and headed until 1989. During these years, he shepherded dozens of excellent students through the course shared between the Geology and Biology Departments, many of whom have gone on to renowned careers in palaeontology.

Bob married Shirley Coryndon, whom he had met through his African work in 1955. Sadly, she died in 1976. She was a noted expert on fossil hippopotamuses and worked, as Bob did, in association with the Leakeys in East Africa.

In retirement, Bob has had to relinquish some parts of his office to other colleagues, but we are delighted he will continue his association with the Geology Department in Bristol. As Richard Leakey noted in a speech at a dinner in his honour in October 1993, Bob seems to have discovered the secret of eternal youth. Indeed, he seems younger and younger each year. This is surely a measure of Bob's infectious enthusiasm for such a huge range of subjects, geological, biological and historical. One's lasting impression of Bob is of his urbane gentility, and long may he continue to grace us with it.

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