

OBITUARY



SIR CHARLES WRIGHT—1887–1975

SIR Charles Wright died at his home on Salt Spring Islands, British Columbia, on 4 November 1975. The details of his extraordinarily full and varied life may be found in *Who's Who* and other biographies, but such records can give no indication of his warmth, kindliness and tremendous vitality. It was my privilege to have known Sir Charles for almost 25 years—but this is less than one-third of the life span of this remarkable man. Sir Charles is best known to the general public as, when a member of the British Antarctic Expedition 1910–13, he found Captain Scott. Had there been television then, his face would have been familiar to every child in most countries of the world—as it is there can be but few people who have not felt deep emotion on reading the account of Scott's heroic attempt to reach the South Pole and of the part Sir Charles Wright played when he sighted the lone tent that contained his body and those of two of his companions. The International Geophysical Year (1957) kindled renewed interest in Antarctica, and Sir Charles, when he was over 70, revisited the Antarctic a number of times on scientific missions.

Sir Charles was born in Toronto, and graduated from the Universities of Toronto and of Cambridge. He served with the Royal Engineers during the first World War and was mainly responsible for the development of radio (wireless as it was then called) in trench warfare.

For his pioneering work in this field he received many honours. After the war he worked at the Admiralty, becoming Director of Scientific Research from 1934 to 1946. He thus had to shoulder heavy responsibilities during the second World War as well. When he "retired" at the age of 60 (in 1947) as Chief of the Royal Naval Scientific Service he moved to the United States and, after working for a spell in Washington, D.C., became Director of the Marine Physical Laboratory of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, La Jolla, California, 1952–56. After a second "retirement" he worked at the Pacific Naval Laboratory, Defence Research Board of Canada, in Victoria, British Columbia, and also at the Institute of Earth Sciences, University of British Columbia, Vancouver. It was not until 1969, at the age of 82, that he officially retired.

When I first met Sir Charles he had embarked upon a new scientific career—trying to unravel the mysteries of geomagnetic micropulsations, oscillations of the Earth's magnetic field with periods from a fraction of a second up to several minutes. At least once a week I would travel from Vancouver to Victoria to meet him, or he would come to see me in Vancouver. This was a journey of about three hours by car and ferry and involved getting up at about 5.30 a.m. to catch the first ferry and returning late at night. Sir Charles was indefatigable and never lost his enthusiasm for his work—occasionally he would arrive with one black shoe and one brown, it being quite dark when he left home. Sir Charles seemed to have "green fingers" in experimental work and pioneered the way (as he so often did) in the analysis of our early records of micropulsations. Whilst acknowledging the power and potential of modern computers, he set great store on "eye-balling" the records—looking first hand at the original data and getting a feel of what was the physics of the phenomenon—and he was seldom wrong.

In 1975, my wife and I stayed for a few days with him and his daughter at his home on Salt Spring Island. At the age of 88 he still insisted on carrying my wife's luggage from the ferry to the car. He showed us the long wall that he had built with his own hands that spring, and after lunch on our first day he climbed around on the roof of the extension to his house to check on the electrical wiring.

He always spoke affectionately of "his boys"—those people who were fortunate enough to have worked under him, particularly those of his Admiralty days. He was one of the most unassuming men that I have ever met, yet beneath that exterior there was a strength of character and purpose that none could deny. He gave freely of his time, friendship and scientific knowledge to all who came in contact with him. It was a fitting tribute that the Canadian Navy carried out his last wish—that he be buried at sea. On 13 November 1975, the destroyer escort H.M.C.S. *Restigouche* with members of his family aboard steamed out of Esquimalt Harbour. The service was conducted by a padre who had served in the Arctic and at the moment of committal H.M.C.S. *Terra Nova* steamed past with ship's company manning the side.

J. A. JACOBS

I HAVE a letter from Sir Charles Wright, written in 1973, in which he recalls "the day in the pack ice when I became, with Wilson's and Capt. Scott's approval, the Glaciologist, thereby escaping the risk of becoming assistant Meteorologist . . . and thereby tied to a job at Headquarters—summer as well as winter". Evidently the appointment was made during the southward voyage of S.Y. *Terra Nova* from New Zealand in December 1910, and indeed on 12 December Scott, himself a shrewd scientific observer, noted in his journal that he "discussed with Wright the fact that the hummocks on sea ice always yield fresh water".

It was natural that a young scientist should wish for his own department, and it testifies to the combined wisdom of Scott and Wilson that Wright's initiative and industry were given