OBITUARY

Victor Eyles
10 October 1895-8 March 1978

Dr Victor Eyles FRSE, a founder member of the British Society for the History of Science, died after a short illness on 8 March 1978 at the age of 82.

He was born in Bristol in 1895 and entered Bristol University in 1912 to read chemistry and geology. His studies were disrupted by the war, but he emerged with a first class honours degree in petrology in June 1920, having seen active service in the Royal Engineers and as an observer with the Royal Flying Corps. In 1920 he joined the Geological Survey of Great Britain with which he served for thirty-five years until his retirement in 1955.

His Survey work, initially based in Edinburgh, involved him in geological mapping in Scotland and the north of England. During the second world war he was sent to Antrim to investigate local sources of bauxite. The drilling project he instigated proved three-quarters of a million tons of bauxite of commercial grade, and by the end of the war a third of this had been extracted, saving valuable import capacity for other raw materials. In the process he became a leading authority on such deposits. He published some of his results from N. Ireland in 1952, and after his retirement investigated other alumina deposits in North America and Jamaica. From 1945 to 1955 he was District Geologist to the Survey taking charge of Wales and the West Midlands. For his work on Irish bauxites and his early historical essays he was awarded a DSc by Bristol University in 1955.

In 1931 he met and soon married Joan Mary Biggs, a postgraduate geology student of King's College London. A period from 1932 to 1935 based at the Geological Museum in London laid the proper foundations both for an interest in the history of geology and of the magnificent Eyles collection of works illustrating the history of geology, which will eventually find a resting place at his Alma Mater, Bristol University.

Being an active collector of books and a bibliophile, Eyles always appreciated the crucial importance for historical studies of attention to bibliographic detail. This was a thesis he developed in print in 1955.[1] He proved its importance by his careful analysis (with Joan Eyles) of the different issues of William Smith's geological map from 1815 to 1819[2] (conclusions fully supported by L. R. Cox's study[3] of some of William Smith's own diaries which were discovered soon afterwards), and by his discovery and demonstration that the first publication of James Hutton's theory had been anonymously in 1785.

Victor Eyles' other major contribution to the study of the history of science was his insistence that chronological order and sequence need to be as carefully studied and documented in history as in geology.[4] This was no doubt one major attribute he brought to his historical work from his geological training. An example of this was the paper he wrote discussing the influence of Steno on the development of geology in Britain.[5] In this he characteristically pointed out that there was some significant evidence that Steno in turn may have himself derived benefit from the then unpublished views of Robert Hooke.

Younger generations of historian of geology, both here and abroad, owe a considerable debt to Victor Eyles who, with his wife, kept the subject alive for many years before the recent resurgence of interest. His lectures on the history of

geology at University College London, between 1951 and 1956 formed a particular element in this influence. To countless enquirers he offered patient and comprehensive help backed up by the Eyles library, and many visitors to the Eyleses' Cotswold cottage benefitted by his dry wit and careful advice, which was sometimes undoubtedly offered to the detriment of his own studies. John Thackray has provided a full bibliography of his published writings.[6]

He was an original member and British representative on the International Committee on the History of Geological Sciences, 1967-72. He became a founder member of this Society, attending the inaugural meeting on 22 November 1946 held at the Science Museum, conveniently close to the Eyleses' London home. He served on Council from 1948 to 1952.

H. S. TORRENS

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[1]"Bibliography and the history of science', *Journal of the Society for the Bibliography of Natural History*, 1972, *3*, 63-71.
[2]*Annals of science*, 1938, *3*, 190-212.
[3]*Proceedings of the Yorkshire Geological Society*, 1942, *25*, 43-53.
[4]Cf. final paragraph of Joan Eyles's letter 'In defence of James Hutton', *Open earth*, 1979, *5*, 8.
[5]*Acta historica scientiarum naturalium et medicinalium*, 1958, *15*, 167-88.
[6]*Journal of the Society for the Bibliography of Natural History*, 1978, *9*, 3-9.