

OBITUARIES

Richard William Hey

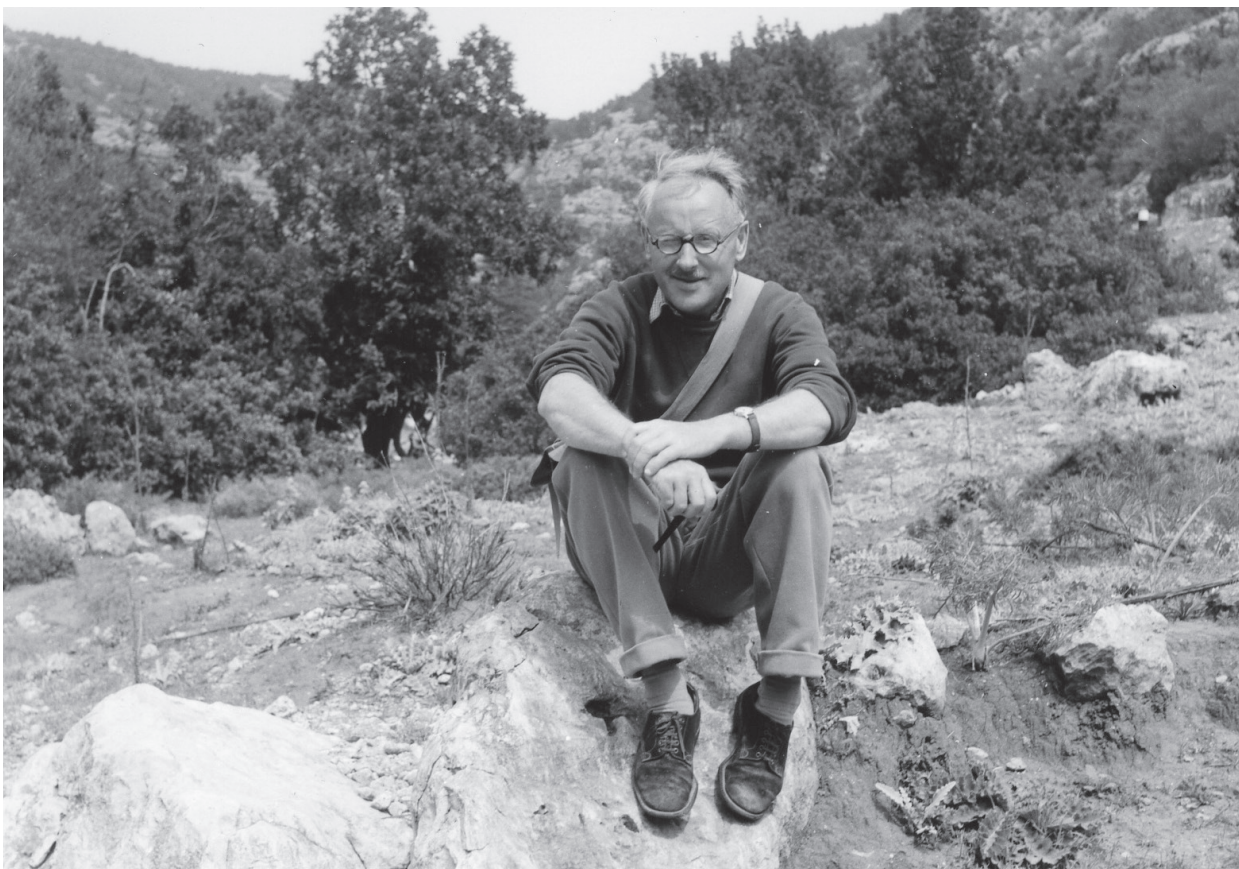
Richard William Hey, who died on 14 November 2011, was one of the first members of the Society for Libyan Studies. His work on the Quaternary geology of Libya was of fundamental importance to the country's prehistoric archaeology as well as to our understanding of its recent climatic and tectonic evolution, and the meticulous observation and rejection of preconceived ideas on which it was founded remain unequalled.

Hey was born in Bramhope, Leeds, on 6 July 1917. He was educated at Stowe School and Trinity College Cambridge, and spent his professional life as lecturer in the Department of Geology at Cambridge. He was a founder fellow of Churchill College, where he became Dean, Praelector and President. To those who knew the ironic side of Hey these roles ring Gilbertian.

Hey's involvement with Libya, as with many other libyophiles, was born of wartime service in the RAF as an aerial photograph interpreter, which took him to

Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Italy. After demobilisation he worked as an exploration geologist in Yorkshire until he was invited by the prehistorian Charles McBurney, who had also spent time in North Africa as an RAF air photograph specialist, to join an expedition to coastal Libya to investigate some of the lithic sites he had encountered in wartime. Hey had read geology as part of his Natural Sciences degree but received no training in Quaternary geology, so that what he was to accomplish owed little to formal studies and more to wide reading, native shrewdness and Yorkshire grit.

Expeditions in 1947 and 1948 yielded sufficient information for Hey to put together a thesis entitled *The Pleistocene geology and late Tertiary geomorphology of Cyrenaica* for which he was awarded a PhD in 1951. He was appointed demonstrator and in due course lecturer, a position he held until he retired in 1982. The thesis provided material for the



Richard Hey in Cyrenaica (photo: C. Vita-Finzi).

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masterly *Prehistory and Pleistocene Geology in Cyrenaican Libya* which he co-authored with McBurney and which was published by Cambridge University Press in 1955.

The book is sometimes held up as an early example of interdisciplinary research. To be sure, the geology benefited from relative dating based on cave stratigraphy, and the site descriptions, notably those associated with spring-laid tufa, included detailed accounts of the mammalian fauna and plant remains. But there is little of what is now called geoarchaeology to fill the sandwich, and it took other, more ecologically minded prehistorians to analyse the sites in their context. However, the failure to fuse the two strands has been an advantage insofar as the durability of Hey's contribution is concerned because his field evidence is presented undiluted by environmental preoccupations and prejudices.

Similarly, Hey was of course innocent of plate tectonics (which had yet to be formulated), although he accepted with some scepticism the sea-level chronology for the Mediterranean that was then current, he presented the field evidence in its own right rather than as the local manifestation of some global model. The papers which epitomise these qualities are 'The

geomorphology and tectonics of the Gebel Akhdar (Cyrenaica)' in *Geological Magazine* (1956), 'The Pleistocene shorelines of Cyrenaica' in *Quaternaria* (1956), 'The Quaternary and Palaeolithic of northern Libya' in *Quaternaria* (1962), and 'Pleistocene screes in Cyrenaica (Libya)' in *Eiszeitalter und Gegenwart* (1963).

These were major accomplishments, but Hey is better known in the UK for his work on the Pleistocene deposits of the Thames and the simple field and statistical techniques, bereft of computing or modelling, by which he was able to trace the early history of the drainage system and to assess the impact on it of glaciations. He was instrumental in founding what became the Quaternary Research Association, yet always in a self-effacing manner that helped to ensure he received scant recognition for his classic researches. He was a fine pianist and cellist, widely read and endowed with a puckish sense of humour, often at the expense of his more pompous French and Italian colleagues. Libyan studies as a whole, his students and his colleagues are greatly in his debt.

Claudio Vita-Finzi