

A tribute to Henry Arthur Osmaston (1922–2006)

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On 27 June 2006 the Quaternary science community lost a beloved colleague and maverick member who lived during a period of global transformation and profound scientific advancement. Henry A. Osmaston's astounding life and research career spanned the better part of the 20th century and vitally linked Victorian-era colonial exploration and discovery with modern technological innovations that stand to revolutionise and reconfigure our understanding of glacial geology, geography, ecology and earth sciences. This special issue of the *Journal of Quaternary Science* focused on a global syntheses of Quaternary glacial chronology is dedicated to the memory of Henry, with the hope of acknowledging his energetic and interdisciplinary intellect which not only merits tribute, but from which our ongoing advancement demands we learn.

A hallmark of Henry's life was his exuberant and multi-faceted curiosity that was unbounded by convention, and seemed to be inspired by whatever region he found himself within. He was born on 20 October 1922 in India, then under British colonial rule, in a small town named Dehra Dun in the Himalayan foothills. His earliest memories featured riding elephants through the colonial forests under the care of his father Arthur Osmaston (1885–1972), an officer in the Indian Forest Service who instilled in Henry a great love of the natural world. Henry returned to England for schooling, and was accepted for Oxford after impressing the interviewer with keen observation and knowledge of avian behaviour: he identified the characteristic tail twitching of moorhens that had distracted his attention out the window. His academic studies there (1940–42) were equally eclectic, in part forced by the geopolitics of the day. Henry switched from chemistry to forestry, was exposed to geomorphology in a compressed course, and was compelled by the Second World War and impending military service to learn electronics. Beginning in 1943 with a commission as second lieutenant in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, Henry served the duration of the war in the Middle East. He retired as a major in 1947 and completed his forestry training at Oxford, graduating in 1948. Since India was no longer part of the British Empire by this time, Henry applied successfully for a post in Uganda. He moved there after marrying Anna, who would become mother to their four children (Amiel, Janet, Nigel and Charlotte) as well as

Henry's climbing partner, close companion and dear friend on many an adventure in the ensuing half century.

It was during his Uganda forestry post that Henry's interest in African Quaternary alpine environments began to take form. Specifically, he found a creative outlet for his passions in regular exploration of the Rwenzori range, or, as they have become known, the 'Mountains of the Moon'. During his leaves, he would spend many days conducting mountaineering ventures into the range with a group of fellow public servants and his wife Anna. Henry's quixotic sense of alpine fun found expression as a founding member of the exclusive Uganda Ski Club, retaining all of ten members worldwide, who proudly held their first international competition in 1958. His many first ascents and personal experiences would later form the foundation for his guidebook, first published in 1972. The second edition (Osmaston, 2006a) was Henry's last major accomplishment before his death, and was able to make it to the press in 2006 just before the centennial ascent of Magherita Peak in June. Other colourful anecdotes of Henry's adventures are recorded by Anna in her book *Uganda Before Amin* (Osmaston A., 1991) and depict a happy time for them all as a family. These accounts describe a man motivated by a wide-eyed wonder for all aspects of his environment, who would often wander far and be late home for dinner on account of his discoveries. He ended up collecting over a thousand plant samples for museums back in England, and in the process wrote the definitive account of Ugandan vegetation, eventually published in 1964. But Quaternary environmental reconstruction soon became his main preoccupation. As Anna saw it:

Henry was becoming interested in pollen analysis on Rwenzori as a means of identifying past vegetation and conditions on the mountain, and when on safari up there he took a peat borer which he would plunge into the bogs drawing up a core of mud for future analysis. I think porters consider all climbers more or less mad, but Henry madder than most for adding plastic bags of mud to their loads. (A. Osmaston, p. 37; see Bray, 1999).

When Uganda regained independence, the Osmastons returned to Britain, and Henry brought academic formalisation to his decade-long study of Ugandan alpine environments by writing his doctoral thesis at Oxford: *The past and present climate and vegetation of Rwenzori and its neighbourhood* (Osmaston, 1965). This work integrated careful observations of ecology and glacial geology with innovative computer data analyses. It was instantly recognised for its brilliance, and his

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external examiner rated it the best he'd ever read. This accolade launched Henry's university lecturing career as he was promptly hired as Lecturer of Geography at Bristol University, where he would eventually retire in 1988 as Senior Lecturer. Not constrained exclusively to the academic realm, Henry and family lived on and operated a dairy farm during this time, a tribute to his hard work, love of the land and practical aptitude. At the university Henry was responsible for teaching a variety of Quaternary courses, including tropical geomorphology, glacial and periglacial geomorphology, tropical ecology, hydrology and Quaternary studies. He also helped run both local and international field excursion courses, a favourite being to study the Quaternary physiography of Mallorca. Bristol faculty colleague Peter Haggett highlighted Henry's imaginative, adventurous, incisive and spontaneously fun approach to his work:

Henry had huge energy and an idiosyncratic style of teaching because he found everything so fascinating, straying way beyond any dull disciplinary boundaries. I shall remember with pleasure long treks with him on local Quantock field days or away in the Ternelles valley in Mallorca where he opened up wholly new questions for speculation and research. Leaping unclothed into a cold tarn and inviting students to follow was all part of the 'Henry' tradition. So too were digging up shells (ordnance, not molluscs) at Sand Bay as evidence of recent sediment accumulation. As I said at his retirement: 'No one of my colleagues is more likely to get you into a scrape; no one whom you would prefer to have with you in a tight corner; no one better at getting you safely out!' (P. Haggett, Obituary, <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2006/5048.html>).

Henry's work extended to far-ranging locations (e.g. Cuba, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Australia, Jamaica and repeat journeys to Ladakh in the Himalayas), and spanned a broad range of topics in over a hundred publications. And with each new endeavour, epic adventures ensued. A brief sample of numerous tales recounted by others give some flavour for the nature of Henry's style: a canyon geomorphology excursion turning into two days stranded in a cave during a flash flood; sinking neck-high in potholes crossing a Welsh river; surviving a blizzard bivouac on Mt Xixabangma, Tibet, on his 65th birthday; and using satellite photos to bribe his way through the Pakistan–India war zone to work on the Siachen Glacier, proceeding alone and mostly on foot through Kashmir, surviving on biscuits and Anna's home-made marmalade.

Henry contributed novel hypotheses, innovative methods, and voluminous rigour to the nature, extent and climate forcing of low-latitude Quaternary glaciation. He compiled his meticulous measurements from field observations and aerial photography into novel reconstructions of palaeoglacier equilibrium line altitude (ELA) trend surfaces for Rwenzori and Kilimanjaro (Osmaston, 1989a, b). This appreciation of local intra-regional variation in glacier responses to climate dynamics anticipated the use of individual palaeoglaciers as the basic unit of analysis in our tropical Last Glacial Maximum (LGM) snowline database project. Clearly, local topography and climate gradients impact glacier extension, and these effects need to be accounted for before regional to global climate impacts can be discerned. In comparing various ELA methods, Henry's large number of samples allowed him to statistically evaluate the most appropriate method. He built upon previous ideas to validate a method he termed AABR in *Quaternary International* (Osmaston, 2005) that more realistically accounted for vertical gradients in mass balance. In the process, he constructed a series of computational worksheets that he wanted to make publicly available – a tribute to Henry's

cooperative generosity. His reasoning that tropical glaciers, in particular, feature steep mass balance gradients has been substantiated by empirical and theoretical work, well documented in Kaser and Osmaston's landmark work, *Tropical Glaciers* (Kaser and Osmaston, 2002). In this compendium, Henry was invited to summarise Quaternary tropical glaciations, and he even hypothesised a unique tropical glacier form, based on the evidence for large-volume moraines. Finally, Henry had a tenacious way of pursuing ideas. Those of us present at the snowline workshop in 2002 were able to be an audience to Henry's creative revision of a long-standing assumption about sea-level lowering corrections to ELA changes at the LGM. This was later refined into a publication in *Quaternary Research* (Osmaston, 2006b) that has stirred expected criticism, but typifies Henry's novel perspective and persistent follow-through in refining ideas.

Henry imbued academic colleagues and alpine expeditions alike with humour, energy and enthusiasm that derived from his zeal for life and care for people. His vigorous mind, challenging suggestions, civility and mischief belied his age, and shattered preconceptions. Moreover, his academic pursuits investigating environmental patterns and processes were complemented by deep concern for the inhabitants of the varied landscapes he wandered. Henry's co-edited volume *Himalayan Buddhist Villages* (Crook and Osmaston, 1994) paints a full portrait not only of the physical environment of Zangskar but also the people, culture, farming practices and religion. His esteem for others was further reflected in his lifelong devotion of significant time and effort to maintaining written correspondence with people (letters and later copious e-mail).

We were saddened at the news of Henry's death, and missed his personal involvement in our September 2006 workshop in China that prompted the collection of papers in this volume. Henry had spoken openly of a heart condition as he continued his travels and adventures beyond his 80th year. His e-mail



Henry Arthur Osmaston (1922–2006). Photo credit: Joe Rosenbaum (Glasgow, 2002)

valedictions often ended wryly; as he departed for field trips to Africa and Asia, he quipped apologetically that his cardiologist predicted he may drop dead any minute, so to kindly excuse any sudden e-mail silence. That he would be fully engaged with work and correspondence to the end is remarkable in many respects, but it was also just ordinary Henry. He was a perfectionist with a passion for understanding, yet lived with humour. He was gifted with broad thinking, keen insight, and his experience transcended vast territories, cultures and academic disciplines. In bidding farewell, we honour his life well lived and offer our sincere condolences with inspired appreciation to Anna and family.

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