

## ERNEST RONALD OXBURGH DCL

Mr Chancellor,

This year marks the bicentennial of the Geological Society of London. The Society, which is the oldest association of geologists in the world, was formed at the instigation of 13 founder-members who met in a Covent Garden pub – a location for this historic event which, in view of the predilections of thirsty field geologists over the intervening 200 years, is second in appropriateness only to a wind-swept rock outcrop. It is the 100<sup>th</sup> President of the Geological Society whom I would like to present to you now: the Lord Ernest Ronald Oxburgh of Liverpool, under whose leadership the Society grew to number more than 9000 Fellows.

The motto of the Geological Society, rendered tastefully in Latin, is: “*Quicquid sub terra est*”, or: “Whatever is beneath the ground”. For two years of his university education, the young Ron Oxburgh, having been ill-advised by an over-zealous headmaster in his native Liverpool to study Classics at Oxford, ran the risk of only ever being able to translate these words, rather than explore their meaning. At least he would have got the translation right, unlike those impudent mining geologists who wilfully mistranslate “*Quicquid sub terra est*” to mean “A quick quid lies beneath the ground”!

I would like to report that it was purely his zeal for science which convinced Ron to switch from Classics to Geology. The truth is more interesting: like many a geologist after him, Ron realised that the study of geology is the nearest thing to a degree in mountaineering! Having made the move, he defied gravity by graduating with honours in his new subject only two years later. He had found his home discipline at a particularly auspicious moment in its history: during the emergence of the theory of plate tectonics, which revolutionised geology to an even greater extent than had Darwin's theory of evolution.

It was Professor Harry Hess of Princeton University whose discovery of seafloor spreading really sparked off the plate tectonics revolution, and it was precisely to work with Hess that Ron crossed the Atlantic in 1954 as a Harkness Fellow. Under the tutelage of this peerless guru of island arc tectonics, Ron got into his stride as an indefatigable field geologist. By all accounts he cut something of an Indiana Jones figure in this period as he swash-buckled his way through the jungles of the Caribbean, on one occasion killing a boa constrictor with a judiciously-wielded geological specimen, on many others running the gauntlet of monkeys, who combined an unhesitating resentment of geologists with disturbing accuracy in their nut-throwing. It was in this same period that he honed orienteering skills which he deployed both for business and pleasure long after. His robust approach to steep slopes was not always appreciated by his students, however, one of whom

later commented that “there are two ways to cross mountainous terrain: contouring and *ron-touring*” – the latter involving an ultra-direct approach to hill traverses which Hadrian would have commended.

In between field forays, Ron acquired a breadth of Earth Science skills which few can match, becoming equally adept at structural mechanics, geophysics, igneous petrology and noble gas geochemistry. Before leaving Princeton, Ron’s true love Ursula came over from England, with the marriage being solemnised in the University chapel.

Upon returning to the UK, Ron obtained a supposedly temporary teaching post at Oxford, though such was his ability that he was to stay on there for 18 years, all the while building a global reputation in tectonophysics and thermal processes in the Earth’s crust and mantle. His scientific accomplishments received the ultimate accolade in 1978 when he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. His dazzling academic career continued at Cambridge, Cornell, Stanford, Caltech and Imperial College.

In parallel with his scientific endeavours, Ron developed excellent inter-personal skills, most notably an uncanny knack for spotting the less obvious factors that make or break the social dynamism of groups. Such skills are of inestimable worth in academe, where hyper-sensitive egos abound. He has a gift

for winning people over to his own agenda in such a manner that they come to think that they actually originated the ideas which they have come to espouse. Potential adversaries often end up as his co-advocates and staunch allies. As Sir Robert May has said of Ron: "... he is a shaker-and-doer, combining real warmth and when necessary uncompromising toughness".

It is precisely this combination of qualities that have repeatedly come to the fore in the second strand of Lord Oxburgh's career: as the broker of successful amalgamations which were previously thought impossible. He first developed this line of work after his arrival at Cambridge University, where three mutually hostile departments were teaching duplicate classes in geology with no interaction. Beginning first with the establishment of a "committee to investigate the possibility of shared tea-break facilities", Ron's agenda finally prevailed with the establishment of a single Department of Earth Sciences, which he went on to lead to world-class status.

This achievement was not lost on what was then the Universities Funding Council, who appointed Ron to undertake a critical examination of geology provision throughout the UK. The resulting 'Oxburgh Review' led to a series of mergers of geology departments which were hotly contested at the time, but have subsequently been recognised as prescient and pre-emptive.

Perhaps the apex of his achievement in the amalgamations game came when, as Rector of Imperial College, he succeeded in merging four jealously independent medical schools in west London into a single institution – a Herculean task in which Ron was fortunate to be able to count on the support of one Professor Christopher Edwards, who is now our own Vice-Chancellor. Some years later, when an awestruck financial journalist asked him how he could even contemplate managing the merger of Royal Dutch Shell with Shell Transport and Trading, Ron was able to smile, shrug and dismiss the task as relatively trivial! He could also comfort himself by recalling the matters he had dealt with during his six years as Chief Scientific Advisor to the Ministry of Defence, in a relatively calm period which saw no more excitement than the fall of the Berlin Wall, the implosion of the Soviet Union and the first Gulf War.

The brutal honesty and integrity of Ron Oxburgh proved the salvation of Shell Group when he was hurriedly appointed as Chairman in the wake of the crisis arising from abrupt downward revisions of previously-stated oil reserves. Already known for his independence of thought, manifest in his championing of an uncompromising social responsibility agenda within the Group, he not only put the company back on course but became one of the world's most visible and credible advocates of a fundamental change in thinking over emissions of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. After retiring from his

position with Shell he continues to tour the planet preaching to the unconverted in Australia and the oil capitals of North America. His message is simple: “We have no time to lose ... we have roughly 45 years, and if we start NOW, not in 10 or 15 years’ time, we have a chance of hitting [the necessary] targets [for reductions in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions]”.

In acknowledgement of the phenomenal contributions of Lord Oxburgh in science, public life and the world of business, contributions which have led to true tectonic shifts in perspective, I now ask you, Mr Chancellor, to bestow upon Lord Ernest Ronald Oxburgh FRS KBE the Degree of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

**Citation by Professor Paul Younger**