

PROFESSOR PERCIVAL GERALD COORAY,

PhD, DIC, FGS, HonFGSAm, FNAS-SL

1920–2003

AN APPRECIATION OF HIS EARLY YEARS AND HIS WORK IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Shantini Ann Cooray, London, UK¹

Deryck Laming, Exeter, Devon, UK²

*“With a hammer in one hand and
a baton in the other”*



Gerald Cooray (Gerry) was born on 16th December 1920 in Kuala Lumpur, Peninsular Malaysia (then known as Malaya), where his father was a senior journalist. His musical education began at an early age, and at 14 he was organist at the Methodist Church in Kuala Lumpur. Later he attended University College in Sri Lanka, taking an honours degree in geography. So, from his early years, he developed skills along two distinct paths – geology and music, symbolised by the geologist’s hammer and the conductor’s baton.

Other articles in this volume describe significant contributions to knowledge of geology, in Sri Lanka and elsewhere: this appreciation concentrates on Gerry’s international activities, mainly in South and East Asia but overall on a world-wide basis, especially during his busy retirement years.

EARLY YEARS EDUCATION AND IMPERIAL COLLEGE, 1935-52

After schooling in Malaya, in 1935 he was sent to St Thomas College, Mount Lavinia, one of the most prestigious schools in Sri Lanka. This was followed by four years as a Geography student at University College Colombo, succeeded by a further two years as Assistant Demonstrator. During those years he met the doyen of Indian geologists, Darashaw Noshervan Wadia, well known for his work on Himalayan geology, who had been asked to develop what ultimately became the Geological Survey and Mines Bureau of Sri Lanka. More than anyone else, it was Wadia who influenced Gerry to become a geologist – and in 1946 he was appointed Assistant Geologist in the Department of Mineralogy, which later became the Geological Survey. It was from there that he was sent to Imperial College, University of London, to take a geology degree, gaining First Class Honours in 1952 after four years of hard work and study, and where the Second Author (DL) first came to know him.

At Imperial College from 1949, the class all realised he was more mature than those who had come straight from school, but did not know that he already had a degree in Geography from Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) because he modestly said very little of his background. We also found out a little of his musical abilities, and the Second Author well remembers vigorously pumping the bellows at the back of an organ in an old Irish church while he played something truly magnificent out front. His modesty hid his talent, and it was a long time afterwards that we found he had directed a symphonic choir in Colombo, conducting the distinguished musicians Peter Pears and Benjamin Britten in a performance of St Matthew Passion by J. S. Bach. In fact he had said of himself: “with a hammer in one hand and a baton in the other”.

¹ London N22 5HS, 426scooray@gmail.com

² Herrington Geoscience, Exeter EX1 3TB, geodev@eclipse.co.uk

WITH THE GEOLOGICAL SURVEY AND IMPERIAL COLLEGE AGAIN, 1952-66

He then worked with the Geological Survey of Sri Lanka, mapping parts of the island, determining the boundary between the Charnockite Metasedimentary Series and the Vijayan Series. In 1959, he returned to Imperial College for his doctorate (on a Colombo Plan Scholarship) where he began the compilation of *An Introduction to the Geology of Ceylon* at the suggestion of Professor John Sutton (published 1967, with a revised Second Edition entitled *An Introduction to the Geology of Sri Lanka* published in 1984).

LECTURING IN AFRICA, 1966-78

Returning to Sri Lanka he continued with the Survey but in 1966 began looking abroad for more interesting work. Through correspondence on charnockites with Professor Oyawoye at Ibadan University, Nigeria, Gerry applied for and was eventually appointed to the post of Senior Lecturer in Geology at the newly established University of Ife, 80 km east of Ibadan, thus commencing an academic phase of his career that lasted 20 years. There was, however, no suitable school there for his daughter Shantini (First Author, SAC), who was then sent to boarding school in Yorkshire, in 1970, during Gerry's six month sabbatical at the University of Leeds. At Ife in that same year, he was appointed Professor and Head of Department, where he continued his policy of placing emphasis on field mapping and associated geological techniques, notably taking students to the Jos Plateau with its Younger Granites and Ring Dykes.

During his time at Ife, he attended the 1968 International Geological Congress, held that year in Prague, Czechoslovakia, despite reports of Soviet armed forces gathering on its borders. On the first day he presented a paper on "Charnockites as metamorphic rocks" which was well received, but the next morning was alarmed to see Russian tanks and groups of people in the streets outside the hotel, with many of the staff in tears. The Congress came to an abrupt end, but after a few days he managed to board a train for Nuremberg and eventually reached relatives in Switzerland.

Despite being well regarded in Nigeria, Gerry moved to Zambia in 1972, having been approached to take up the task of establishing a geology department in the new School of Mines at the University of Zambia, Lusaka. His experiences at Ife stood him in good stead when setting up the department, including the all-important element of geological field work, including visits to the huge open-pit Copper Belt mines. He also investigated charnockites of igneous aspect similar those he had seen in Nigeria. He became the first Dean of the School of Mines, but when a policy of appointing Zambians to key posts was introduced, he was asked to relinquish his Deanship and he left in 1978, staying in London with his daughter, the First Author (SAC).

IN ARABIA, 1978-86

Gerry Cooray then wrote to a friend, Dr. Ahmed al Shanthi who he had come to know at another Geological Congress, in Sydney, Australia. As a result of this enquiry, in 1978 he was appointed Professor of Geology at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, with the task of editing a series of books on geology published by the university. He then transferred to lecturing and developed his emphasis on field work, showing many students the interesting geology of the western part of the country. When his university contract ended in 1983 he transferred to work as Senior Editor with the Directorate General for Mineral Resources in Jeddah, editing reports by geologists working for the DGMR, both local and foreign³.

³ The Second Author (DL) worked in a similar capacity for the DGMR several years later, unaware that his good friend had been a distinguished forerunner in that activity.

RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS

Although engaged in geological research from his student days, first with a study of the mineral idocrase for which he was awarded a prize “for excellence in geology, mining or mineralogy” while still an undergraduate at Imperial College, along with other prizes and a First Class Honours degree, Gerry's interest spread to charnockites on his return to postgraduate studies at Imperial in 1959. In fact, he had already made contact with Professor C. E. Tilley on the subject during a visit to Cambridge University as early as 1952, and they were the subject of his PhD thesis and their occurrence in the Precambrian rocks of Sri Lanka. This research continued when he went to Nigeria, ultimately resulting in over 100 publications in national and international journals. His original work on these rocks gained international recognition and his research papers became bench-marks at that time.

He recognised the importance of scientific writing as the medium of communication of facts and theories. He was a gifted and lucid writer, realising “how important a role scientific writing has played in my life – and it has not stopped” (quoted by C. B. Dissanayake, 2003). In addition to his earlier books on the geology of Sri Lanka, he collaborated with others in the preparation of a follow-up book *The Geology and Mineral Resources of Sri Lanka*, intended to mark the centenary of the Geological Survey of Sri Lanka in 2003. He was also co-author of *A Guide to the Minerals of Zambia*. Finally, perhaps his greatest work is *Pioneers of the Geosciences*, the result of five years' library research, consisting of concise and easily readable accounts of 75 pioneers of various geoscience disciplines. The Second Author has the privilege of contributing to, editing and producing this volume to publication standard.

RETIREMENT, 1986-2003

In anticipation of retirement, he purchased a bungalow at Mahakanda on the slopes of the Hantana Range, with a fine view of Mount Peacock. In this most beautiful location he invited his mother and Joan's mother, Gladys Loos, to live there, and he moved there himself in 1986 following a mild heart attack.

After beginning his retirement, Gerry became more active and well-travelled than ever, entering on a period of varied activity initially with Professor Cyril Ponnampereuma who appointed him as Co-ordinator of the Publications Unit of the Institute of Fundamental Studies at Kandy, and subsequently (1992-96) became Visiting Lecturer at Peradeniya University in the departments of Geography and then Geology – lecturing in Quaternary Geology to Final-Year students, and also developing the distinctive and successful Geoscientific Writing Workshops that were later to be offered to many young scientists in other countries.

He was President of the Association of Geoscientists for International Development (AGID), 1984-88, during which the Conference on Geoscience Education (COGEOED) was held at Southampton, England. He was also a Life Member of AGID, serving as a member of Council (1980-84). Soon after, he was invited to be the Chairman of the IUGS Committee on Geoscience Education and Training (COGEOED) of UNESCO.

It was under the sponsorship of AGID that he began his highly successful three-day Geoscientific Writing/Editing Workshops, the first in Colombo in 1986, and he went on to give over 50 of these in many locations in Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Zambia, in which almost 1500 scientists participated. He was also the author of AGID's “best seller” booklet *Geoscientific Writing and Editing*.

His support for the teaching of Earth Science extended to many schools in Sri Lanka, and on a wider scale in South Asia and elsewhere. He was a strong believer in international co-operation for advancing geoscientific research, and contributed immensely to the dissemination of geoscientific knowledge in the less developed countries. One of his most notable achievements was to encourage the geoscientists of Pakistan to host the first South Asian Geological Congress (GEOSAS) in 1991. This resulted in his being given a title “The Godfather of GEOSAS” – a title he was immensely proud of – and his real moment of glory was in 1995 when he spearheaded the organisation of the highly successful GEOSAS II, held at the Galadari Hotel, Colombo.

He was a co-founder of the Ceylon (later Sri Lanka) Association for the Advancement of Science (1945), fellow of the Geological Society of London, foreign member of the Geological Society of Finland, and honorary life member of the Geological Society of Sri Lanka, for which he served as President in 1993. He was also an honorary life member of the Geological Society of Zambia, and elected fellow of the National Academy of Sciences in Sri Lanka in 1990. In 1995, the Geological Society of America bestowed upon him the highly prestigious title of Honorary Fellow of the society.

Gerry was also very supportive of research into the history of the ancient continent of Gondwana initiated by his long-time friend Professor Masaru Yoshida of Japan. The large number of condolences received from the Japanese and Indian geoscientific communities on his death is an indication of the profound respect they had for their Lankan colleague.

The Geological Society of Sri Lanka annually awards the P. G. Cooray Medal to the most outstanding young Sri Lankan geologist.

FINALE

Professor Gerald Cooray died on 4th January 2003 at his home at Hindagala. He had been in poor health for a number of years though this did not seem to dim his energy when he visited London to pursue his research in the Geological Society Library, where he worked until the last – at 82 his heart finally gave out and he died quietly in his sleep.

Gerry was passionate about Geology. Much of his retirement was devoted to writing and his editing workshops, particularly in South East Asia. In the final years of his life, his great project was to research and put together the material for his *Pioneers of the Geosciences* book, with help from the Second Author. During this time, whenever he visited his daughter (SAC, First Author) in London he would spend many happy hours doing his research at the Geological Society Library. On his last visit, even though suffering from heart failure, he still continued his work in the library despite shortness of breath, and his daughter remembers phoning the staff there to make sure of his safe arrival so as to allay the concerns that she and her mother had about his travelling. He carried on with his writing and other academic work right up to the day he died – such was his dedication.

During his lifetime, he was appreciated and admired by those who knew him. In the words of a distinguished colleague, Professor C. B. Dissanayake, “Professor Cooray was a born geologist and died a geologist . . . indeed, a highly gifted man, displaying unwavering enthusiasm and an array of skills that covered a variety of disciplines”.

DJCL and SAC – 30th September 2014