

DISTANT THUNDER

Poetic license

Geologist and science writer Nina Morgan muses over a tombstone tale

In geology, as in life, things are not always what they seem. Ordinary visitors to the village of Carlops, in the Pentland Hills southwest of Edinburgh, might well have shied away when confronted with the geologist, and staunch Scottish Nationalist, Archie Lamont [1907-1985]. Remembered by his colleagues, Euan Clarkson, Professor Emeritus at Edinburgh University and Eric Robinson, who retired from University College London in 2001, as a huge shambling old man, with tiny round spectacles, a massive bald head and a spectacular white beard, Lamont was frequently taken for a tramp.

But behind the scruffy exterior was a first class mind. After initially studying Latin, Greek and English at Glasgow University, in his third year Lamont took up geology. He graduated with an MA in classics in 1928, then carried on to earn a First Class BSc in Geology. He went on to obtain a Demonstratorship and to become President of the Scottish Nationalist Association. He remained a fervent Nationalist for the rest of his life, but was forced to resign the Demonstratorship after a short time due to ill health. Once recovered, he went on to complete a PhD on Ordovician of the Girvan area in 1935, after which he worked in Dublin and Birmingham. On his return to Scotland in 1945 he was awarded a research fellowship at Edinburgh University and worked on the fossiliferous Silurian rocks of the Pentland Hills. But, by 1951 Lamont, having quarrelled with the then Professor, left Edinburgh University to plough his own furrow, pursuing a wide range of topics and founding and providing most of the copy for the *Scottish Journal of Science*.

Geology and Poetry

In 1943, Lamont published *Patria Deserta*, a slim volume of poetry that drew on his many interests. For example, his sonnet *Palaeosmilia*, dedicated to a fellow

tombstone geologist, skilfully combined his interest in geology with philosophy:

Two hundred years did the
dark limestone hold
A script, but all the letters have been lost;
The dead lie nameless. Acids of mould,
Sharp agencies of wind, crystals of frost
The drifting rain, the sun the winter cold,
Splintering tightest atomies apart,
Shew forth the hidden threads of corals old
On the smooth stone traced
with minutest art.
Over the myriad centuries between
Nature remains thus faithful to her own,
Dissepiments like a thin veil are seen
About the theca of the hollow cone,
Calyx, tabulae, septa live again
Louder than bones and epitaphs of men.

Sight unseen

All very evocative, but Lamont later admitted in a letter to Robinson that the poem described a tombstone he'd never seen:

“Now the truth is I imagined that
Tombstone, and used *Palaeosmilia*
because it sounds like some smiling
ancient Mona Lisa ... As Descartes said:
'Thought is perhaps even more important
than fact at least in some stages of
development' Maybe.”

Instead, he revealed that the inspiration for the poem came from a tombstone in a churchyard in Durham described by the geologist, Hugh Miller [1802-1856]. In *First Impressions of England and the English People*, Miller muses “how much more indelibly nature inscribes her monuments of the dead than art” when describing a weathered gravestone which:

“...told that when it had existed as a
calcareous mud deep in the carboniferous
ocean, a species of curious zoophyte, long
afterwards termed *Cyathophyllum fungites*
[a rugose coral], were living and dying
by myriads ; and it now exhibited on its
surface several dozens of them, cut open
at every possible angle, and presenting
every variety of section, as if to show what
sort of creatures they had been... Never

was there ancient inscription held in such faithful keeping by the founder's bronze or the sculptor's marble ; and never was there epitaph of human composition so scrupulously just to the real character of the dead.”

Tea with Archie

Lamont didn't restrict his poetic imagination solely to verse. He also, Robinson recalls, “introduced strange Scots names—like Haggis Rock [a conglomerate] and Shepherd's Tartan Rock [a black and white conglomerate] to the Silurian of the Southern Uplands.”

A visit to Lamont's dwelling, Jess Cottage, Robinson reports, was quite an experience. “Surrounded by collections of fossils, rocks and all manner of things which he accumulated, strong tea with condensed milk from the tin was just one of the memorable courtesies extended to the visitor seeking assistance with due deference... he piled up the empty tins at the back as a kind of stratigraphy.”

How future geologists will interpret this deposit remains to be seen. But says Robinson, “I can still taste the tea!”



End notes: Sources for this vignette include: Archie Lamont (1907-985) geologist and poet by Euan Clarkson, Proc. Geol. Soc. Glasgow 150th Anniversary Special edition, pp. 36-38; 2007-2008; Archie Remembered by Eric Robinson, *Edinburgh Geologist*, **42**, spring 2004; Eric Robinson, personal communication, 2018; and *First Impressions of England and the English People* by Hugh Miller, 1857.

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