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News of the community

Martin Aitken

Doctoris Honoris Causa of the University Blaise Pascal (Clermont-Ferrand, France, 15 October 2003)

Introductory talk by Jean Faïn

J. F M.A.

I am honoured to present Professor Martin Aitken as Doctoris Honoris Causa of the University Blaise Pascal.

His initial career was in Nuclear Physics following a first degree in Physics at Oxford University. After completing his D.Phil. in 1954 and several years of research using an electron synchrotron he interested himself in applications of magnetism to archaeology especially in the use of a portable proton magnetometer for detecting buried pottery kilns and other archaeological remains.

In 1957 MA became Deputy Director of the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art (RLAHA), Oxford, a position he held until his retirement in 1989. The aims of this laboratory focussed on applications of 'hard sciences' to archaeology following the recent emergence of radiocarbon dating. The word 'Archaeometry' was coined as the title for this activity jointly by MA and the then professor of archaeology at Oxford, Christopher Hawkes; it was also to become the title of a periodical that was launched by MA in 1958 which is to-day essential study for all those who work in the field.

At the beginning of the sixties MA involved himself and his students in the development of thermoluminescence dating (TL), in the first place in application to pottery; this had been tried unsuccessfully by a physicist in California a year or two before. Notably he found a way of suppressing 'spurious TL' and after taking account of radiation dosimetry the first actual dating results were published in the journal Nature in 1968. This new absolute technique eventually showed itself to be highly fruitful and during the seventies it was applied to a number of different approaches adapted to various situations. The Oxford Laboratory was the seedbed for a number of researchers who then started their own teams not only in UK but also in Europe, Australia, north America, India and elsewhere. In 1978 the first international congress on TL dating took place at Oxford; thereafter it became a regular meeting every two, then three years at various laboratories around the world, including also the technique of ESR dating with which it had the common concern of radiation dosimetry.

In 1978 the Oxford Laboratory successfully applied the TL technique to dating volcanic events; this was in collaboration with vulcanologists from the University Blaise Pascal as well as Norbert Bonhommet from Rennes. An age of 26000 years was obtained for sediments heated by the lava flow at Royat and 8500 years for the lava flow at St.Saturnin, both near to Clermont Ferrand; later more direct application to various lava flows was shown to be possible by Georges Valladas, Pierre-Yves Gillot and Gilles Guérin at the CEA-CNRS laboratory at Gif-sur-Yvette.

In the meantime Russian researchers showed that TL dating could be extended to windblown sediments and this was followed by the Simon Fraser laboratory in Canada which showed that the event dated was the last exposure of the sediment to sunlight; this laboratory also invented the associated technique of Optically Stimulated Luminescence (OSL) giving rise to a new domain of application which literally exploded during the eighties. All of this stemmed from the initial work at MA's Oxford Laboratory; at the same time MA devoted much effort to studies in archeomagnetism and palaeomagnetism and this was in part the stimulation for his visits to the Auvergne.

In 1980 a research group at the Laboratoire de Physique Corpusculaire of the University Blaise Pascal, which had previously acquired some expertise in application of TL to physics, began to use the method for dating. Very rapidly contacts, then collaborations, were linked to the Oxford Laboratory; I do indeed remember my visits to the laboratory, at 6 Keble Road, which was housed in a

domestic house rather than a purpose-built laboratory; access to the four floors was by means of crooked stairs which became more tortuous with increasing altitude! However I have mainly the memory of the warm and enriching welcome that we always received from Martin, his colleagues and students.

In the years following, collaboration with the RLAHA were extensive as, for example, on the controversial site of Glozel where Oxford carried on the important work initiated by the late Vagn Mejdahl in Denmark; there was also mutual participation in the examination of doctoral theses. During the international meeting at Cambridge in 1987 MA suggested that the next could be held in Clermont-Ferrand and this took place in 1990. MA is also a member of the Editorial Board of the international newsletter Ancient TL which is presently edited by the Clermont TL group following its founding in St.Louis by the late David Zimmerman and subsequent editing at Durham (UK).

Promoted Professor of Archaeometry at Oxford University in 1985 MA is also the author of several scientific books devoted to dating techniques especially that on TL dating, which is still the 'bible' in the field. He was honoured for his scientific achievements by the Gemant Award of the American Physical Institute and the award of the Pomerance Medal of the Archaeological Institute of America. In April last year on the occasion of his 80th birthday friends and colleagues of Martin gathered together in Clermont-Ferrand for a very interesting two days of scientific discussion.

Martin and his wife Joan have visited France many times over the course of years, interesting themselves particularly in local vineyards, and they finally decided to retire in the middle mountains not far from Clermont; we are very proud and honoured by this choice. I shall not forget to associate Madame Aitken with this ceremony; alas her state of health does not permit her attendance. Thus not only do we welcome in Clermont to-day, at the Université Blaise Pascal, a well-known researcher but also someone who is deeply attached to our region.