



Preface

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Preface

It was a great honour for me to present a personal tribute to Bill Evitt at the 46th Annual Meeting of AASP – The Palynological Society in San Francisco on the 20th of October 2013, as it is now to write a preface for this splendid biography. I am one of the admiring and grateful colleagues privileged to have shared many exciting years helping to develop the science of dinoflagellate cysts, with Bill frequently leading the way.

Beginning in the early 1960s, Bill was the key figure in laying the foundation for understanding fossil dinoflagellate cysts. Prior to this, in the 1940s and 1950s, the Norwegian biologist Trygve Braarud had cultured several living dinoflagellate cysts, and Erdtman (1954) had suggested a link between these and the hystrichospheres, a group of fossil microplankton of uncertain affinities attracting the attention of leading palynologists. Bill was the first to realise the enormous potential this had for palaeopalynology. In a seminal publication issued in 1961 (*Observations on the morphology of fossil dinoflagellates*), following discussions with both the plankton biologists and palynologists (who were graciously acknowledged in this paper), he presented his initial observations showing that many Mesozoic–Cenozoic hystrichospheres were, in fact, fossil dinoflagellate cysts. In the introduction he wrote: ‘The purpose of this paper will have been served if it provides a fresh insight into the complex relationships of these microfossils and if, in doing so, it inspires more critical observation of the morphological features on which progress in paleontology depends.’ Bill’s bibliography is testimony that he devoted the rest of his professional life to ensuring that all of this happened. He set the highest standards of observation and provided the basic terminology for describing dinoflagellate cysts, which is still used today.

This comprehensive and detailed biography is fitting for a scientist who, in his work, delved deeply to discover the details necessary for understanding basic principles pertaining to his science. Pressures for younger scientists to publish more have increased since Bill

was in research, but there are still some valuable lessons to be learned from his approach. He took the time needed to tease out small-scale morphological details, together with careful, precise and thoughtful documentation in excellent publications with long shelf-lives. Above all he demonstrated the value of working with superbly-preserved material and, being reminded of this here, this awakened wonderful memories for me. Early symposia on palynology involved sitting through talk after talk often illustrating barely recognisable palynomorphs from poorly-preserved material following less than optimal sample preparation. Bill would then present a few stunningly beautiful specimens that showed wondrous details. One could hear the reactions from largely industrial colleagues, struggling with real-life working problems, and inevitably someone at the back would shout ‘ok - but where’s the oil?!’ Eventually, we all learned that Bill’s approach almost certainly helped to find more oil. His life is a prime example of the critical role played by industry in promoting basic research in the developmental stages of a science – a sobering thought today when there is still a great need for innovative research, but dwindling support from both industry and the public sector.

Like most great scientists, Bill Evitt was the right person in the right place at the right time, but above all the right person – a meticulous microscopist, a true scholar and an excellent teacher. Bill would have been awarded the Nobel Prize equivalent for palynology if there was one, and if there was one for palaeontology, he would have been a very strong contender. Few scientists will experience the degree of impact that Bill’s work had on his chosen field of research, and all of us owe him a great debt of gratitude.

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