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Raath, Michael A.

2023-07
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Bruce Sidney Rubidge – a Personal Appreciation

M.A. Raath

Formerly Bernard Price Institute for Palaeontological Research, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

In July 1970, South Africa hosted an ambitious international symposium – the Second Gondwana Symposium – under the auspices of the International Union of Geological Sciences Commission on Stratigraphy, which turned out to be both memorable and remarkable. It was memorable for many reasons, not least of which was that its sessions were held in two cities at opposite ends of the country, the first in Cape Town in the southwest from 3 to 8 July, and the second nearly 1400 kilometres away to the northeast in Johannesburg from 21 to 24 July. But what of the intervening 12 days? Well, that's what made the Symposium even more remarkable and more memorable – it involved a 12-day excursion by rail across virtually the entire succession of South Africa's extensive Gondwana-age geology, with stops along the way to examine important geological or palaeontological sites under the guidance of local experts. During the trip participants took their meals and slept overnight on the train as it chugged its way across the changing scenery of the South African veld. I am surely one of the dwindling few who still remember this wonderful field-trip like no other, stopping every now and then along the line to examine yet another geologically important or interesting site before chugging happily on to the next stop.

I mention this train-trip in the context of this publication because it was on one of those stops that I first came across Bruce Rubidge, when the delegates were hosted by Bruce's parents, Richard and Pamela Rubidge, on their farm, Wellwood, in the Graaff-Reinet district of the Eastern Cape. This stop allowed delegates to inspect the

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Figure 1. Richard Rubidge, Bruce's father (facing camera), in lively discussion with Prof. Alfred Romer of Harvard in the grounds of Wellwood Farm, July 1970. Other Gondwana field-trip participants look on. (Photograph: M.A. Raath.)

***Palaeontologia africana* 56: 13–15 — ISSN 2410-4418 [Palaeontol. afr.] Online only**
Permanently archived on the 21st of July 2023 at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
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remarkable privately owned Wellwood Collection of fossils which had been collected initially by Bruce's grandfather, Sidney Rubidge, on his farm and the surrounding areas, assisted over the years by several people, most notably a local resident in nearby Nieuw Bethesda, Croonie Kitching, and his young son James. James later went on to achieve international fame for his prowess in finding and collecting fossils. He also had the distinction of being the first member of staff appointed to the fledgling institute that Bruce himself would one day lead – in fact in succession to James Kitching himself – namely the former Bernard Price Institute for Palaeontological Research (BPI) at the University of the Witwatersrand.

The Bruce I saw that day at the Wellwood garden-party was a young, self-assured mid-teenager, confidently circulating amongst and interacting with all those international scientific high-flyers, including such luminaries as Alfred Sherwood Romer of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard, Edwin H. Colbert of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, Nicholas Hotton III of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, Alan Charig of the British Museum of Natural History (now the Natural History Museum, London), Pamela Robinson of University College, London, among many others, and I was frankly impressed.

After that initial contact at Wellwood it would be several years before our paths crossed again. By then Bruce was finished with school and I was no longer with the National Museums and Monuments organization of what was then still Rhodesia. I had emigrated with my family to South Africa, where I was at the (late lamented) BPI at Wits University. Bruce was then a rookie curator at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, impressing us all in the recently established Palaeontological Society of Southern Africa with his energetic and penetrating studies of the unrewarding and difficult base of the Beaufort Group of the Karoo Supergroup in the main Karoo Basin.

Looking to track Bruce's palaeontological progress, one inevitably turns to the newsletter of the Palaeontological Society, *PalNews*. The first mention of this young man is in Volume 2(2) of April 1980, where it is recorded that he had been in the field with his Stellenbosch University supervisor and friend, Burger Oelofsen, another 'young Turk' of the fledgling palaeontological community in South Africa, and it records that Bruce was beginning what became his life-long love affair with the *Eodicynodon* Assemblage Zone of the basal Beaufort Group (inadvertently called the 'Eudicynodon Zone' in that report). The next issue of the newsletter records that Bruce had joined the National Museum in Bloemfontein in that month, April of 1980, but then soon had to report for compulsory national military service a few months later in July of that year.

I resigned from the BPI in 1987 over a dispute with the university's administration, and subsequently got an appointment to the Port Elizabeth Museum Complex (now Bay World, Gqeberha). James Kitching stepped into the leadership role as Acting Director of the BPI, and this is how it remained until May 1990, when Bruce was appointed the new full-time substantive Director. The history of the Institute since then tells its own story. Student numbers increased impressively, Black students enrolled for post-graduate studies for the first time and in unprecedented numbers, staff and student publications in respected peer-reviewed international journals increased dramatically, international research collaborations blossomed, and the Institute went from strength to strength.

Under Bruce's leadership one long-standing and seemingly unattainable dream came true – the final unification of all the fossil collections held by Wits University under one roof. Until then there was an impenetrable divide between fossils from the Plio-Pleistocene hominid-bearing deposits of the then-Transvaal and all other fossils: primate fossils from those deposits were to be held, curated and studied by the Department of Anatomy at the University's Medical School, under the unshakeable insistence of its long-standing Head and Dean of the Faculty, the eminent Professor Phillip Tobias, whereas all non-primate fossils were relegated to the care of the BPI. This artificial, counter-productive and irritating divide had rankled for decades. Bruce, however, through his diplomacy, charm, determination and persuasion, managed to resolve it and all collections were at last unified in the successor to the BPI, what was called the Evolutionary Studies Institute (ESI). This Institute, and the DSI/NRF Centre of Excellence in Palaeosciences hosted at Wits (now rebranded to GENUS), more than anything else stand as monuments to Bruce's stellar contribution to progress during his years at Wits.

Unlike several notable others in the discipline, Bruce was never one to self-promote ostentatiously, but rather kept a modestly low profile and quietly got on with his own work, while welcoming and encouraging cooperation within the Institute and with many others around the world, and that has remained his style throughout the whole of his illustrious career.

It was interesting, but exhausting, to be in the field with him. His energy is seemingly limitless, like his enthusiasm, notwithstanding the fact that he chooses to work in some of the most uncomfortable and unrewarding strata of the South African Karoo. I particularly remember a trip he invited me to join in 1991, coincidentally the year of my 50th birthday. This expedition was to examine Lower Karoo deposits around the little Karoo town of Laingsburg, barely ten years after a devastating flood had destroyed much of the town and killed more than 100 people, several of them pensioners in a local old-age-home, after the little ephemeral Buffels River came down in spate after a cloud-burst storm in 1981. It is indelibly imprinted on my memory that on that day, 11 February 1991, because of a breakdown in one of the camp's field vehicles, Bruce decided it was necessary to go into Laingsburg town to get some part or advice from a local motor-mechanic to get the vehicle operational again. He invited me to accompany him. It was a blisteringly hot day, so when we got into Laingsburg we decided that, as it was close to lunch-time, the sensible thing to do would be to call into a local pub and get something light to eat, but

more importantly to get something cold to drink – like a nice ice-cold beer, which is precisely what we did. I was immediately reminded of that memorable scene in the 1958 film 'Ice Cold in Alex', when John Mills, Sylvia Syms, Anthony Quayle and Harry Andrews meet up after the war in a pub in Alexandria, Egypt, to drink a celebratory cold beer after the end of the desert war. That was exactly how it felt for me, and I indeed ran my finger down my glass to capture the beads of condensation, just as John Mills had done in that memorable scene in that movie. Nobody who has seen the film will ever forget that scene.

It was perishingly hot, so we asked the barman in the pub if he had any idea what the temperature was, and he told us that a few moments before, at 12 noon, he had been listening to the radio news, and it was announced that Laingsburg had just recorded a temperature of 48 degrees Celsius (118 degrees Fahrenheit). As you can imagine, the beers went down extremely well after that news!

That evening back in camp, we celebrated my birthday with 'room-temperature' (= warmer than 'luke-warm') box red wine, and a camp meal prepared by camp master-chef, James Kitching. Unfortunately he chose meat that had somehow managed to evade his otherwise infallible camping meat preservation techniques – so it was 'off' and completely inedible. It is a birthday celebration I will never forget – and intend never to repeat. Thank you, Bruce and James!

Bruce's leadership of the BPI, then the ESI, and latterly also the DSI/NRF Centre of Excellence in Palaeosciences have all earned him an unassailable reputation in the panoply of both the University and the discipline of palaeontology generally. He transformed the BPI from a Cinderella institution in a hastily re-purposed university maintenance building into unquestionably the most modern, up-to-date and best resourced of any palaeontological institution in South Africa, and possibly on the continent. I can speak with some authority on this, as I was involved in a nation-wide audit of natural science collections in South Africa in 2009–2010, and my particular assignment was to assess geological and palaeontological collections in museums, universities and other publicly-funded institutions throughout the country. The BPI under Bruce's leadership came out significantly above all other comparable centres.

I am personally grateful to Bruce for rescuing me after my early retirement from the Port Elizabeth Museum complex, when he invited me to apply for the newly established post of University Curator of Collections in 1996. I was fortunate to get the job, and that saw me through to my final retirement. I remain grateful to the triumvirate of Bruce, Prof. 'Spike' McCarthy (Geology) and Prof. Beverley Kramer (School of Anatomical Sciences) for their support of my candidacy. But I know that I owe most of my gratitude to Bruce.

I salute you, Bruce, for what you have done for palaeontology at Wits and in South Africa, and indeed the world. The legacy you have left is one to be proud of, and the University itself can boast of it for years to come. I wish you and Marina a long, happy and productive retirement back in your beloved Karoo. May you find many more interesting ancient 'goggas'.