

Celebrating 100 Years of Female Fellowship of the Geological Society: Discovering Forgotten Histories

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Foreword

I am really pleased to have been asked to contribute the Foreword to this Special Publication of the Geological Society. When I was approached by Professor Cynthia Burek, I said 'yes' without hesitation as this is an area very close to my heart. For nine years I chaired the UK Government's Expert Group for Women in STEM, and spent much of this time trying to energize the Professional Bodies as a whole to improve their performance in both attracting and promoting women in their respective sciences. Some did very well (Institute of Physics, for example) and others less well. I pushed for the Geological Society to engage with this agenda through positive action with some effect. I have been a Fellow of the Society (FGS) for nearly 50 years, became a Chartered Geologist at the inception of the professional accreditation while I was Secretary of the Society, and finally became only the second female President in its over 200-year history. The experiment has yet to be repeated for a third time!

As stated in the Introduction to this Special Publication, the first female President of the Society was Professor Janet Watson, of Imperial College (1923–85) who was a distinguished geologist. She was married to Professor John Sutton and together they focused on Scottish Geology. She was amongst the first female geologists to be awarded the title of Professor in a British University and she was always ready to give those at the beginning of their careers the encouragement they needed. She was a great lady and also acted as my unofficial mentor in London University when I arrived at Birkbeck College in the early 1970s. She did much to support me during those early days and this showed me how important good role models are in encouraging women to aspire to high office. Her final anniversary address as President was in June 1984, when she talked about Scotland's post-Caledonian history and how it acted as the divide between the North Sea and the Atlantic between the Devonian and the Paleocene. Her untimely death from breast cancer in 1985 deprived those in the generation after me of a distinguished British geologist. It remains worrying that only 29% of Fellows are female (Burek and Higgs, this volume) and I wonder how many go on to obtain professional accreditation.

In reading the papers in this book I became aware of my ignorance of how many brilliant

female geologists there have been over the years. I feel very humbled by their achievements against all the odds. For example, Margaret Chorley Crossfield (Burek, this volume), the very first female FGS, and Dorothy Rayner (Boylan, this volume), who was amongst the first women to gain a tenured position in a British university.

When I first entered the Geological Society apartments in Burlington House, what struck me was that all of the portraits and named rooms were those of men – did women not play a role in Earth Science or was our contribution not recognized? The papers in this book shout that the latter is the explanation. The achievement of which I am most proud as President is having the lecture theatre named after Janet Watson, with her portrait taking pride of place at the front.

What shines through in the papers of this book is how women, during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, had to struggle against strong opposition from their contemporaries. The most extreme form of this was the appropriation of their work as in the case of Marie Tharp, who was the first person to link the processes forming the East African Rift to that in the Mid Atlantic (Higgs, this volume). Others experienced prejudice, demonstrated by the few women who have been recipients of the top medals of the Society (Burek, this volume). The first woman to gain a medal was Gertrude Elles in 1919, but even after 100 years, the number of medals awarded to female geologists is nowhere near where it should be. It gave me great pleasure when, in 2010, Margaret Wood (proposed by Cynthia Burek) gained the Distinguish Service Award – only the second to be given to a woman – and I was the President presenting it to her: an all-women cast!

My greatest wish is to be in the audience when the majority of the top medals go to female geologists and all are presented by the third female President. I hope it will be soon and that I can be there cheering them on with many of the authors in this book. Well done to the authors for shining a light on this issue, and well done to the editors for putting this book together. I recommend reading it as it is an inspiration to us all.

Professor Lynne Frostick