

Awards and Citations

Response by Derek E. G. Briggs for the presentation of the 2015 Paleontological Society Medal



Derek E. G. Briggs

Thank you Jakob for your kind words. You didn't mention some of the exciting projects that you and I have collaborated on—the mystery of machaeridians, for example, which we showed were armored polychaetes, and the reconstruction of the plumage colors in the Jurassic dinosaur *Anchiornis* using the arrangement of the melanosomes in its feathers.

I am enormously pleased and honored to receive this recognition from the Paleontological Society, and from you my peers, friends, and colleagues. I have enjoyed a wonderful welcome from this community since I moved to the United States in 2003, and for that I am extremely grateful. You've sent me great graduate students, supported my research proposals (or at least some of them!), elected me President of the Society, and this medal is surely the icing on the cake. But this award, like any other, owes much to those who provided support along the way. The list is long and time is short—Mark Wilson's instructions about this part of the proceedings are very clear—five minutes only: 'longer speeches are quickly losing popularity with the audience'. I am aware of this, of course, because I'm normally *in* the audience! So the executive summary is 'thank you' ... but perhaps you'll indulge me for a few minutes if I focus on how influences on this side of the Atlantic have contributed to shaping my career.

My Ph.D. supervisor at Cambridge, Harry Whittington, came back to the UK from Harvard in 1966 bringing the Burgess Shale project with him. He was a modest, unassuming man, but inspirational (he continued to publish papers into his nineties!). Not only did he take me on as a graduate student, he also facilitated funding through his Cambridge college, which was key to my being able to move from Trinity College, Dublin where my interest in paleontology had been initiated by Charles Holland and George Sevastopulo.

I did the 'field work' for my Ph.D. in the drawers of the Smithsonian with Simon Conway Morris (I did not see the Walcott Quarry until 1981 when we discovered new fossil sites in Yoho National Park with Desmond Collins!). Harry allocated me the bivalved arthropods (which, as Jakob has pointed out, included *Anomalocaris*). Much of Walcott's collection was not catalogued in those days, and Fred Collier allowed us remarkable freedom to explore the material.

After five years in Cambridge (including a college postdoc fellowship, which was essentially a continuation of my Ph.D.) I landed a job at Goldsmiths, University of London. There, my connection with the United States continued: my first graduate student, Stephen Hesselbo, worked on the late

Cambrian of Wisconsin (as did Nigel Hughes). We soon learned how hospitable and friendly folk can be in the Upper Mississippi Valley, as long as you steer clear of topics such as evolution. Stephen stayed on the Koch family farm and was able to take aerial photographs of his field area from Albert Koch's private plane!

I spent my first sabbatical, in 1983, at the Field Museum in Chicago. That was the year that Harry Whittington received the Paleontological Society medal at the GSA meeting in Indianapolis. Having put the pieces of *Anomalocaris* together the year before, we were working on a detailed account of the animal.

I was at Bristol University when Fred Collier told me that the Smithsonian and the American Museum of Natural History were planning a re-excavation of Beecher's Trilobite Bed, which prompted me to join the party there to investigate the geochemistry of the sequence, which I did with Robert Raiswell and Simon Bottrell of the University of Leeds. This catalyzed my interest in the role of authigenic minerals in soft-tissue preservation and, incidentally, provided a link with the Yale Peabody Museum where Charles Emerson Beecher was one of my predecessors. In the meantime, Steve Gould inspired my research on the rise of morphological disparity in the Cambrian, which I carried out in collaboration with Richard Fortey and Matt Wills.

A second Chicago sabbatical in 2001–2002 with Susan Kidwell and David Jablonski at the University of Chicago played an important role in my decision to move to the United

States. Susan, David, and their colleagues introduced me to the dynamics of a large paleontology group in the U.S., and I wanted to create something similar for myself. Chicago had already figured it out, and Yale was closer to the UK. The Yale Department of Geology and Geophysics and the Peabody Museum of Natural History continue to be a great venue for paleontology. I've had the excitement of teaching classes with Dolf Seilacher, but most importantly I've had the resources to surround myself with stellar graduate students and postdocs who provide the real rewards of this job.

Pivotal to my career has been Jenny, who has indulged my obsession with paleontology since we left Dublin to go to Cambridge University in 1972. She did a 'Ph.T.' (putting husband through) and has been making things possible ever since. She would be quick to remind me that our real achievement is three sons—all scientists, but of very different kinds—with families on the other side of the Atlantic. In a very real sense her outgoing personality, energy, and ability to put down roots wherever we go have made this medal possible. So I thank you all, and everyone who has shared this journey with me, for this special and much appreciated honor.

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