

Book review

It's warmer down below: The autobiography of Sir Harold Harding 1900–1986. Edited by *Amanda Davey*. Tilia Publishing UK, Horsham, 2015, £19.95, paperback, 288 pp., ISBN: 978-0-99339650-2

Sir Harold Harding was a contemporary of Rudolf Glossop, and his memory is esteemed in the British Tunnelling Society with its biennial Harding Memorial lecture and annual Harding prize, Sir Harold having been the founder chairman of that society. Sir Harold had earlier written an account of his life that was simply factual and apparently not particularly well received, so at the urging of acquaintances he set to work on a rather more frank account of his life and work. Following his death some 30 years ago, the manuscript languished in a box until his granddaughter, Amanda Davey, rescued it and through the small publishing organization that she runs has produced this volume.

In a way it is a pity that the book appears 30 years after Sir Harold's death, because in particular given the age he reached there can be few potential readers of the book to remember working closely with him. Sir Harold's own account stretches to over 230 pages, and it is complemented by an account of how the book came to be produced as well as the usual foreword, introduction and acknowledgements. The book has a very detailed index, a selected bibliography, metric conversions (for the book is written largely in Imperial units) and usefully and rather unusually a brief description of every person whose name appears in the text.

One needs to read the book to gain a full appreciation of the man and his work. He was not just a tunneller: he was involved with the development of Soil Mechanics Limited, and after a long career with Mowlem and Soil Mechanics, he left in 1956 after some acrimony over a roads project in Iran. Thereafter he operated independently, becoming involved in the Channel Tunnel attempt that was killed off by the Labour Government in 1972, and various other, sometimes international, projects. He was President of the ICE for the 1963–1964 session and, perhaps as a recent ICE President, he became a member of the Tribunal following the tragic slide of colliery spoil tip No. 7 that killed 144 people in the village of Aberfan on 21 October 1966; now a half-century ago, but still deeply engraved in the psyche of former mining communities in South Wales. Poignantly, most of the fatalities were children at school.

Sir Harold was well placed to deal with the technical matters of the Tribunal, as he had been with Mowlem when the dam at

Chingford collapsed under construction in 1939 (subsequently rebuilt, to form the William Girling Reservoir) where he had met and formed a friendship with Terzaghi and Skempton, and because of his role in Soil Mechanics Ltd and its parent company Mowlem. It came as an unexpected surprise to me to read of Alan Bishop, John Hutchinson, Arthur Penman and Hayden Evans, all of whom I knew in their heydays.

The book is paperback, with a beautiful cover based on a tapestry depicting an early steam engine and some viaducts, stitched by Sir Harold himself. Each chapter is illustrated, but not in colour, mainly with photographs but sometimes with Sir Harold's own drawings. The method of reproducing the photographs is sometimes disappointing, and they are all small, but they are abundantly clear to show what they are intended to. Some captions are perhaps a little short. Early in the book, a typographic error in someone's writing, where 'genre' is turned into 'gene', is treated humorously, and despite the obvious care that has gone into the production of this book, some 'Institutions' have regrettably become 'Institutes'.

It is often said that just as fiction contains elements of autobiography, most autobiographies contain some elements that verge on fiction. In this case, clearly not, although a gentleman born in 1900 like Sir Harold clearly downplays in his autobiography some of the less pleasant events, such as his exit from the Mowlem organization. With a life like his, one does not need to flesh out the details with imagination.

The man's life started before aviation and finished with Concorde; he was born into a world where the external combustion engine ruled, but he lived to see it almost totally wiped from the map by the internal combustion engine. When we visit Burlington House, many of us will come via Piccadilly Circus, where the tube station owes a lot to his engineering skills. Sir Harold lived through both world wars, and among other things worked on the Mulberry harbours that consolidated the success of the D-Day landings. Civil engineers and military engineers will find things to interest them in this volume, as will historians of the period. Engineering geologists too will also find much of interest, although they might be stunned to discover that their profession had to be concealed from a senior engineer who firmly believed in Archbishop Ussher's rather precise but geologically impossible estimate of the age of the Earth!

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