

AV 10: John Wilfred Wright oral history summary

Recorded at West Wittering, 18.3.2000. Interviewed by Bernard Stonehouse.

[01.13.10] [00.01.10] Bernard Stonehouse [BS] introducing John Wright, OBE. [00.02.00] Description of JW's family background and education at Trinity College, Cambridge where he read Mathematics before changing to Geography. Mention of his interest in cold climates and working at the Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI) between expeditions. [00.04.45] Mention of first expedition to Hagavatn, Iceland with John Simpson, and one other, to survey the ice cap. Including repetition of education at Cambridge. [00.07.50 Break]. [00.08.00] Description of Cambridge expedition to Iceland, 1934. Mention that Brian Roberts (BR) recommended he go. Anecdote about BR breaking in to Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI) age 13 when it was a house on Lensfield Road. [00.09.47] Mention of Oxford University Expedition, 1935-36, with Sandy Glen (SG); Cambridge Travellers club and meeting his wife, Dorothy, who went on to be Directors assistant at SPRI; Anecdote about recommending Dorothy to SPRI and Dorothy recommending him for survey work in Sudan. [00.12.45] Memories of expeditions including mention of being geomorphologist and surveyor with SG's expedition; mention of David Keith; description of transport arrangement on the Iceland expedition including a folding boat from Wordie and using ponies when the road ended. [00.15.05] Description of the Oxford University 1935-36 expedition including mention of Andrew Croft and Greenland; travel to Northeastland by sealer and suffering from sea sickness; setting up the bases; SG's policy of changing people round apart from Robert Moss; JW spent as much time as he could in the field; comments on the trapper (Karl Bengtssen). [00.20.58] Description of the food JW ate on the Oxford expedition. Mention of Kalaallit and not having time to hunt; rations in the field of Pemmican, oats and ships biscuits; BS comments on the food he had on his expeditions to the Antarctic; mention of Ted Bingham and the British Graham Land Expedition. [00.24.33] Description of JW's survey work on the Oxford expedition including completing a map of the north coast with Archie Dunlop Mackenzie; anecdote about meeting and confronting a polar bear; survey methods employed in the field. [00.28.55] Description of first winter on the Oxford expedition stuck at the advance base. Mention of Andrew Croft getting lost in a blizzard. [00.30.05] Description of mortality rate on polar expeditions 1919-1939 being low as per his research published in Polar Record. Comments on the death of (Gino) Watkins. [00.32.22] Comments on the Oxford Expedition second seasons survey work. [00.34.15] Description of return to Cambridge in 1936 when he had a room at SPRI to write up his results. Mention of the other room occupied by a German Jew rescued from Germany under Hitler. [00.35.24] Memories of the 1937-38 expedition to Ellesmere Island and Greenland organised by Haig-Thomas (H-T). Comments on H-T's personality and strong relationship with the Kalaallit; mention of Nukapinguaq; JW's frustration that H-T wasn't interested in publishing the results of his expeditions; overwintering at Thule; comments on meeting two Kalaallit at Thule including Peary's son; anecdote about returning recently and meeting Peary's great-grandson. [00.41.23] Description of survey work and travel on Ellesmere Island with dogs and a boat. Mention that the Danish recommended travelling with the Kalaallit but JW and Hamilton travelled on their own. Comments on travelling with local people and anecdote about Kalaallit hunting a polar bear. [00.44.35] Description of survey technique he used in the Arctic involving a modified Theodolite and camera. [00.47.52] Memories of wishing to work in Canada but the Canadians were not interested in the Arctic until after the war. Memories of meeting Americans in Thule including MacGregor and anecdote about flying with Ike Schlossbach. [00.51.20] Comments about returning to Cambridge and getting married. [00.51.50] Description of Debenham recommending JW for a job in the Sudan Survey Department. Memories of his predecessors in the department; comments on the development of the

geoidal surface and working on the arc of the meridian from Archangel down through Africa; mention of the 30th Arc being a great project with a 1000-mile gap in Sudan; technique for surveying in a flat area; left Sudan after Independence in 1956. [00.56.25] Description of joining Hunting Surveys for 7 years and becoming Chief Surveyor; difficulties of working for a commercial company. Mention of Peter Mott who was his boss at Hunting Surveys. [00.58.40] Repetition of working at Hunting Surveys; description of going to Afghanistan to work on surveying the road from Kabul to Kandahar. [01.00.14 Break] [01.00.47] Memories of the official opening of SPRI in 1934. [01.03.30] Memories of James Wordie and Frank Debenham. [01.06.45 Brief conversation off camera and shots of BS reading his questions] [End 01.13.10].