

WORKING FROM ORIGINAL SOURCES: SELECTED TOPICS IN THE HISTORY OF GEOLOGY

A Keck geology consortium student-faculty seminar-workshop convened by:

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Eleven students and seven faculty from eight Keck consortium geology departments convened at Pomona College, February 22-25, 1990 for a workshop on history of geology. Workshop participants utilized a resource unique to Pomona College: the Woodford Collection, a comprehensive array of books, maps and periodicals dealing with geologic topics and dating from the 16th century. As part of the workshop, Professor Martin Rudwick, author of The Meaning of Fossils and The Great Devonian Controversy and Professor Mott Greene, author of Geology in the Nineteenth Century, led seminars. Later, students and faculty selected a period or topic of interest and read relevant original documents. The workshop culminated in an evening seminar in which participants discussed the results of their investigations.

The workshop opened Thursday evening with an evening lecture by H. Stanton Hill, Pomona College '33 and patron of the Woodford Collection, on the history and holdings of the collection. The collection is largely the legacy of Professor A. O. Woodford, founder of the Pomona College geology department, who gathered the materials across Europe and North America during the first half of the twentieth century. Of special interest are: the first edition of Steno's Prodromus and the rare 1671 English translation of it; John Woodward's personal, annotated copy of his An Essay Towards a Natural History of the Earth, 1788; and two copies of William Smith's geological map of England and Wales, 1815.

The following morning, participants were briefed on procedures for working with "special collections". Librarians impressed upon the group the fact that old books and maps have, in effect, outlived the lifespans intended by the original publishers. They emphasized that as a shared resource, users must take special care and precautions with old materials in order to insure their continued preservation.

Seminars with Professors Rudwick and Greene were highlights of the first full day of the workshop. Rudwick began his seminar stating that historians of science, like all specialists, have developed particular craft skills. He invited the group to consider the following question, "How does reading a text for historical purposes differ from reading it for scientific purposes?" With guidance from Rudwick, the group constructed guidelines that would help its members "think historically". Citing examples culled from nineteenth geology history, Rudwick exhorted participants to examine the assumptions underlying investigative approaches, to consider the way in which a text is designed to persuade and to determine who was the author's intended audience. He suggested to the group that in order to do history of science, one must "read between the lines". Most importantly, Rudwick impressed upon his listeners the necessity of considering the past in its social, political and cultural context.

In a seminar during the last evening of the conference, participants recounted the results of their days' researches. As a result, though each individual had worked only with a limited number of materials during the day, all had the opportunity to appreciate the themes of various centuries. Workshop participants emerged from the experience valuing the cultural imbeddedness of scientific investigation.