

Pyroclasts: Oil for a Squeaking Wheel?

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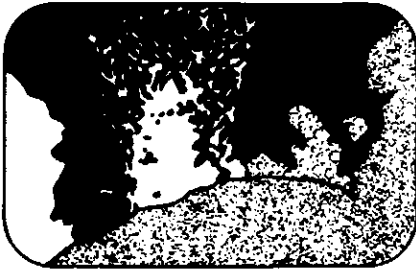
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Pyroclasts

by Ward Neale

Oil for a Squeaking Wheel?

Don't breath a word of it to any envious outsiders but NRC grants to geoscience research made a great leap forward this year. They were increased from a total of \$4.5 million to \$5.3 million. This increase of 17.5 per cent was well ahead of that awarded to some other sciences. We'll never know exactly why our plight was suddenly recognized, we can only speculate.

Maybe it was due to the credibility that Gerry Middleton, Mike Keen and their colleagues imparted to the Earth Sciences Grant Selection committees by sending grant applications to external referees, by visiting university departments and interviewing applicants in person and by generally upsetting the established pecking order. Possibly it was a series of protest papers such as the duet on the perils of the existing pyramid of science. Or how about the Canadian Geoscience Council's special committee that visited the Hon. Bud Drury and Drs. Schneider Gingras a couple of years ago and presented a very well documented case (namely the CGC status report) for earth science serving the nation at a cut-rate price? The passivists among us will say none of this was necessary and that the powers on high in their wisdom suddenly decided that a few crusts were deserved by the unassuming, God-fearing, uncomplaining earth scientists who sat docile with tongues hanging out in the middle of the howling pack. Maybe they are right.

Anyway, our university researchers are \$0.8 million richer this year and this may be only the tip of the iceberg. If the current proposals of the Committee of University Geoscience Heads meet with

success you can expect another enormous shot-in-the-arm for both industrial and university mission oriented research in the near future.

The Plight of the Polite Peers

I recently resigned in mid-term from NRC's Earth Science Grant Selection Committee. It was with regret for this was one of the most worthwhile working groups I've ever known. My reasons for leaving it – exhaustion and laziness.

This year the average committee member devoted at least three full weeks to the task of peer review: one on reading scientific papers and evaluating reports of external referees; another interviewing applicants and visiting their labs; the third a decision-making week of horror in Ottawa. The Ottawa sessions ran from 8:30 AM to midnight daily. In some ways they resembled those intensive, live-in, mind-bending management courses (e.g., the Management Grid) where you become so hyped-up that you can't sleep in the few hours available. Ten dedicated people sit around a table and challenge each other's and the external referees' appraisals of each individual applicant's performance record. This is no mere counting of publication titles. Two judges have been assigned as 'experts' on each application and woe betide them if they haven't done their homework for they are exposed to the merciless scorn of their colleagues. No stones are left unturned in the search for justice; if referees' reports or experts' testimony is suspect then phone calls are made to distinguished scientists around the country seeking confidential opinions. University researchers certainly get a square deal and fair appraisal – but what about the peers who judge them?

The committee members receive no compensation above expenses, in fact they lose money as the government per diem doesn't come close to the price of a good dinner at the Chateau Laurier (where most are billeted). Self-employed industrial consultants suffer a very real personal financial loss, employers lose the services of some of their most productive scientists or executives for at least three weeks per year. The average professor on the Committee has a big bite taken out of his "spare time" and his productivity falls off notably. His successors generally (but not generously) recognize this by cutting

back his research grant as soon as he leaves the Committee. Worst of all is watching tough justice being meted out to your close friends and collaborators knowing that you will have to face them in a few days and politely tell them that they're not nearly as good as they thought they were. It's sheer martyrdom!

A token reward for those saintly characters who last out their full three year terms would be: 1) A letter of appreciation to their understanding employers; 2) A healthy honorarium for their suffering families; 3) Their pictures on the covers of *Geoscience Canada* appropriately encircled by coronas, haloes or reaction rims.

The Working Poor

One still hears complaints about salaries from Canadian university teachers even though most of them, regardless of incompetence, now receive almost automatic promotions to the rank of Full Professor which is equivalent to journeyman electrician or master carpenter in most parts of the country. More justified are the plaintive cries of government scientists who seldom make it beyond the Associate Professor salary scale. But it's all relative . . .

During a recent lecture tour that took me to several small, good, privately endowed U.S. colleges, I had a glimpse of an entirely different style and level of dedication. Typical was a bright young assistant professor, seven years beyond the Ph.D., publishing regularly in good journals and earning less than \$12,000 per annum in a town where the base pay for garbage collecting was \$17,500 per annum. He was worried that the college might let him go due to financial exigencies because he would miss "the challenge and rewards of this job". Nuts? I don't think so.

Tunnel Vision

During the lively discussion following the formal part of the CGC Forum at GAC/MAC Vancouver, Peter Meyboom made a point by referring to a personal experience. When he very purposefully left geoscience (and his promising career as a hydrogeologist) and attempted to inject some science into political and financial circles he found, somewhat to his surprise, that he was welcomed by economists and political scientists who were very receptive to his different viewpoints. However,

whenever he went back to talk with his former peers in geoscience he found he was rejected as one who had deserted the discipline. His conclusions – geoscientists are snobs and it's high time they opened their eyes and minds to the world beyond their discipline.

This brought into mind a number of people to whom I mentioned the impending forum and who replied "Who has time for that crap when there are technical sessions in progress?" This led me to wonder who the zombies were who came to listen to Meyboom, Schneider, McLaren *et al.* while the dedicated scientists stayed with the trade talks, so I looked around the forum audience and saw Paul Hoffman (our first P.P. Medalist), Chris Barnes (this year's P.P. Medalist), Bill Fyfe, Mike Keen, Ray Price, Don Stott, Dave Barss, Dave Strangway *et al.*, *et al.* I finally concluded that only the apprentices stayed with the trade talks.

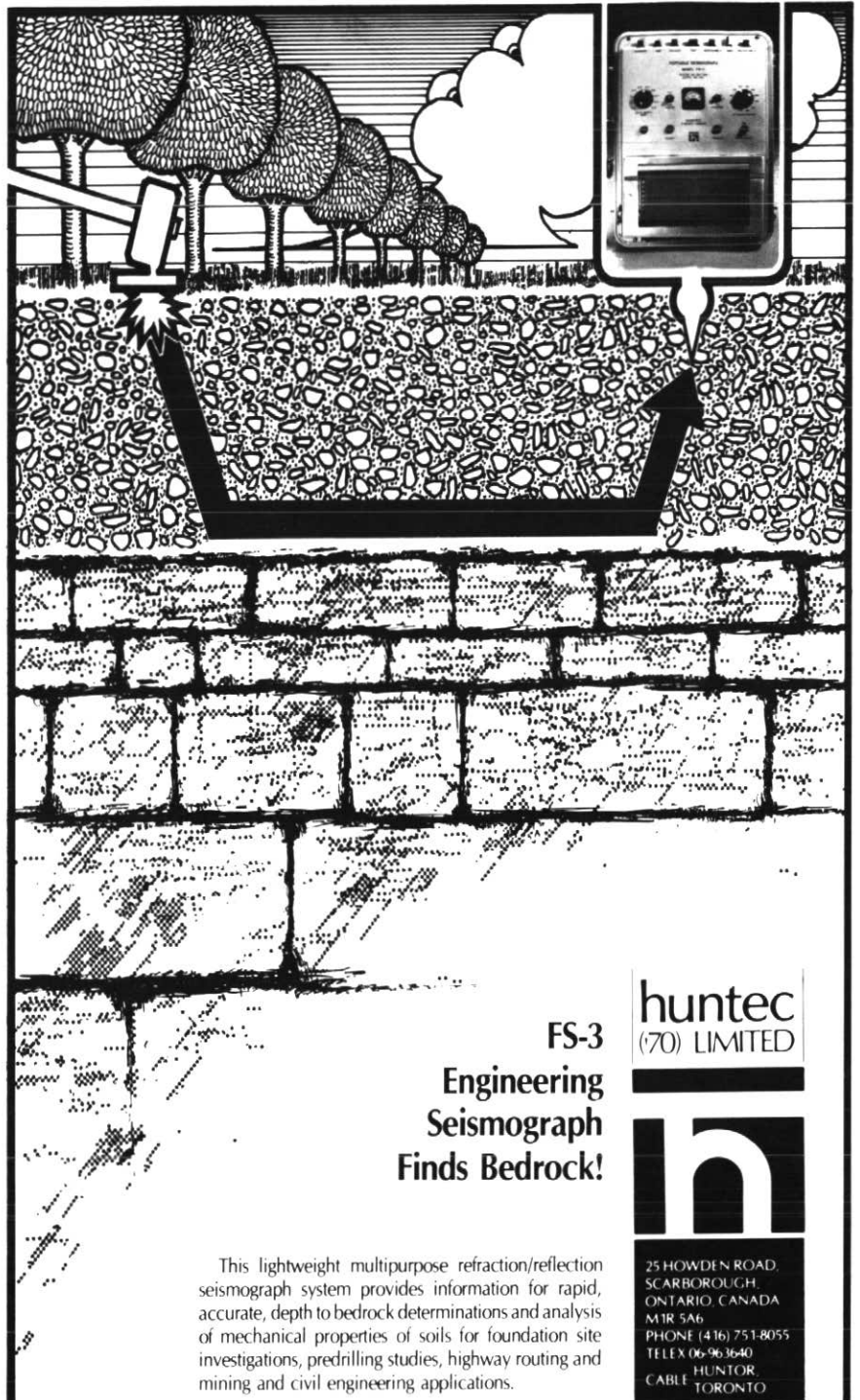
Without Honour

I wonder if our own Atomic Energy authorities have ever called upon Canadian geoscientists outside of government to advise on radioactive waste disposal in the manner in which the Swedish government has sought the advice of John Cherry (Waterloo) and Bill Fyfe (Western)? Or do we already have enough experts on tap in Louisiana and California?

It's Not Oil as Vaguely Defined

The second major CGC status report on the geosciences in Canada is now available free of charge from the GSC in Ottawa (Paper 77-6). It's well worth the price for it consists of 75 pages telling of our progress in 1976 and our hopes and aspirations for the future. And it's not all dull turgid reading; consider these classics to delight Robert Bates or Sandstone Sam fans: ". . . few present new concepts or even a new view of an oil idea. . ."; and "Experienced exploration geologists can make a valuable contribution by publishing on vaguely defined regional observations. . .".

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