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Nigel Bonner, formerly Head of the Life Sciences Division and Deputy Director of the British Antarctic Survey between 1986 and 1988. Presentation and speeches made on his retirement on 6 May 1988.

David Drewry : It's a beautiful day and we have to sort of have a slightly more sadder occasion, but I hope that the sadness will be sufficiently leavened by your enjoyment of the splendid food and hospitality which has been created and presented by quite a lot of the staff over the last two days for this retirement party for Nigel Bonner.

I'm not going to say a great deal because I've asked Dick Laws to say a little bit more about Nigel's contributions to Antarctic science, to BAS in particular and to draw any other threads that he feels suitable on this sort of juncture.

I must say myself that over the last year I have had a great deal of support from Nigel. I've found his professionalism, his knowledge and his great command of what has been going on in our part of the Antarctic over a large number of years extremely supportive and I would like to record, Nigel, that I'm very grateful to you for having sort of eased me into BAS over the last twelve months.

When I came here last year, Nigel and I discussed my trip to the Antarctic and at that point he said that he would very much like to be able to introduce me to the BAS stations and our science activities. Well, as things transpired, it wasn't going to be possible to do that and I and John Bawden were going down to the Antarctic to make a tour around. But as you were aware, at the very last moment Sheila Bawden had an ankle injury and John was not able to accompany me, which was very sad, both for him and for I, for myself. But Nigel very graciously stepped in at the very last minute and so [laughter] we were able to fulfill that earlier idea of going round together and I must admit that I could not have had a better companion through our extensive and whirlwind travel through the Antarctic and I look very fondly back on some of those moments now and I'm sure I will do in the next few years.

I found Nigel a very companionable individual to be with. His knowledge of Antarctic biology was a great foil to my interest, which has always been diverted towards the physical sciences and the glaciology, and when I was about to tread on some lichen or some moss bank, Nigel would pipe up and not only stop my foot from going on it, but also tell me in great detail what it was and I can't admit to having a strong biological background, but a lot of what Nigel told me I hope will lodge somewhere in the back of my mind and be useful in the future.

A couple of sort of incidents during our visit to the Antarctic, which imprints themselves on my mind. One of course was visiting South Georgia, when I was taken around to several of the old whaling stations during our visit. We went to Grytviken of course, but to Stromness, Leith and Husvik. Now of course, Nigel, and indeed, Jennifer, had both been out in South Georgia in the fifties when Nigel was a sealing inspector. And of course, at that time the whaling stations were in full flight and activity and now going back and seeing these empty, abandoned stations, sort of echoing of the past, it was a tremendous experience to go round with Nigel, who made them come alive by describing the activities and the processes and everything of the minutiae of these research stations and I was very grateful for that privilege.

On other occasions, we also had the privilege of Nigel's experience, when he happened to latch on the Bransfield's bond list to a very good Australian red wine which I think we commandeered and drank most of the, of that out during our time on the Bransfield and I'm indebted to you for that discovery, Nigel.

And the other incident was when we were on HMS Endurance for three weeks. I was, Nigel was bunking with the doctor on Endurance and over the course of that period, it was revealed at the end just what a stoic Nigel really is, because we discovered that the doctor in fact kept a pair of false bosoms underneath his bunk and I think that Nigel dealt with that situation with great equanimity [lots of laughter]. Even when accosted on the fancy dress evening by the doctor regaled in his splendiferous attire.

So I have very fond memories of our trip, Nigel, but more importantly of course, the support that you've given me and of course to BAS. I don't want to go into any more personal details [laughter], but to ask at this stage for Dick Laws to come along and to fill in some of the background and, of Nigel's career, and some of the details, which he of course is far more familiar than I. Dick.

Dick Laws : Thank you David. Well I had very short notice of this occasion. I might say to start with that it's a great pleasure to me to be here and to see so many familiar faces and a good smattering of new ones. BAS I think has been extremely fortunate with the calibre of the people who have worked for the organisation and no more so than in the case of Nigel.

A year ago, of course, Nigel was doing the same sort of thing for me, when it was my time to retire. And a few months before that for Charles Swithinbank. His retirement brings to an end a period of really unprecedented loss of senior staff in BAS and while it's good to see a proper age structure developing within the Survey, I think that Nigel's career emphasises very much what the loss of experience is. It's particularly good I think to see that after the rather rapid changes in recent years, BAS can now be looking forward to a period of stability in this respect and many of you will continue through your careers and see the age structure at BAS eventually right.

Well, I've been asked to say a bit about Nigel's career. He was at school during the war years and most of that time he was waiting impatiently to go into the army. But by the time that he did, in 1946, the war was over and it left him with a sense of slight lack of purpose, but he did do two years in the army on national service and was commissioned into the Royal Artillery in 1947. I think some of you in his Division will have recognised that that has left a certain [laughter], I was going to say scars, but I don't mean that [laughter], a certain ability to command [laughter].

Well, defending the Isle of Wight wasn't very arduous [laughter] and so it left plenty of time for zoology in areas which Nigel has kept up with subsequently, mostly beetles, dragonflies and adders, as well as yachting in the Solent. I know that he thoroughly enjoyed his time in the army and the posting enabled him to begin to build up the eclectic knowledge of zoology which he has and encyclopaedic knowledge, really by comparison with most of us, which is really very exceptional, I can assure you and of course, as you know, he went on to become an authority on the other end of the scale, with the large mammals.

He wasn't taught biology at school and so he had to spend a period at the Northern Poly in London, qualifying for London University. He went into UCL in 1950 and was fortunate to

rub shoulders with that genius, JBS Halldane. John Maynard Smith was a contemporary, a classmate of Nigel's at that time, and so was Jennifer, soon to share the rest of his life and to provide so much support.

His Antarctic involvement dates from 1953. Another of his classmates was Bernard Stonehouse, who had come back from Stonington and his work on the Dion Islands on the emperor penguins and had persuaded Miles Clifford, then Governor of the Falklands, to fund an expedition to South Georgia to do some comparative work on the king penguins. He persuaded, without too much difficulty I think, Nigel to go along with him and they set up a two-man base in a garden shed in the Bay of Isles. While Bernard studied the kings, Nigel worked on the elephant seals. No-one, incidentally, had told him at that time that I was coming to the end of my work on elephant seals, which had been going on for several years, and so to some extent I regret that I stole some of Nigel's thunder.

That expedition has been described as a private expedition by Bunny Fuchs in his book about the Survey, but I think Nigel would claim very vehemently that it was very much a government expedition. It was administered through the FIDS Scientific Bureau, it was provisioned by FIDS, it was paid – he and Bernard were paid through the Crown Agents, like the other Fids - and the hut in the Bay of Isles had been given a station number – a letter, a base letter, for the station list – M - which was later usurped by Anvers Island.

So after a very interesting period at South Georgia, Nigel came back in '55 to work up the elephant seal material, for a year at the London Hospital with Richard Harrison, and among the findings that came out was the first description of the hypertrophy of the foetal gonads in elephant seals and I was particularly impressed by the field photographs of the blastocysts in the period of delay before implantation. Nigel knows what all this means [laughter] but I know many of you don't, but it also showed me his skills as a photographer, which he has of course maintained subsequently.

I had drawn up a new management regulations for the elephant seal industry at South Georgia and Nigel went there in 1956 to implement that new policy, working with the sealers and it developed into what I think is a classic example of rational management for a natural resource. He acquired at that period a very detailed knowledge of South Georgia, which has stood the Survey in very good stead and he did some large scale elephant seal tagging and organised the tooth collection for monitoring the catches. After a year, he was offered a longer term contract and he stipulated that he should have a house and be able to take his family - by then, Jennifer and Nigel and Jennifer's eldest son Martin, their only son, Martin. And they had three very happy years together at Grytviken between '58 and '61 before Nigel returned for a final season.

I think I'm quite sure that South Georgia, for the Bonner's, was a very satisfying period. Besides the elephant seal, Nigel began to work on the fur seal and in 1956 he was probably the first biologist to land at Bird Island, since the Discovery biologists had been there in the thirties, twenty years earlier. And he reported the, or provided the first good evidence of the expansion of the fur seal population, which as you know is one of the great success stories of conservation. And he returned several times, up to 1962, and conducted work on the fur seal, which led to the publication of a major monograph in 1968. Nigel's monograph on the Antarctic fur seal was the first really scientific contribution to that species and it is still referred to and quoted as a, an important contribution to knowledge on the species.

He and Jennifer made many friends among the Norwegians at South Georgia, where they were either both or one of them for seven years, and acquired through those contacts and travelling around the island an enormous amount of knowledge on whaling, shore-based whaling and on the island, and I think it must have given Nigel, well I know it gave Nigel, great satisfaction to return to the island in recent years with BAS.

In '62, he decided he had to do something about a career and so he became a lecturer at Sir John Cass College in London. He enjoyed the student contact and was a good lecturer, later to become a quite outstanding speaker, as many of you will know.

He became involved with NERC in '67, when he took over the Seals Research Unit at Lowestoft. There was a small team of three – Bill Vaughan, Sue Fogden and Nigel – and they were working then on the UK seals and started to put knowledge of those species and the conservation and management problems on a firmer footing. Our paths crossed again when I was a member of a visiting group to that unit at Lowestoft and, of course, from Nigel's point of view, the seal work around the British coasts provided further opportunities for interesting field work in very attractive, remote and fascinating places.

Coming to BAS then, he succeeded me as the head of the Life Sciences Division in 1974 and inherited an enthusiastic team of great characters, many of whom are still with us today. Of Barry Heywood of course who, in turn, will be succeeding Nigel as Deputy Director. He enjoyed the return to the Antarctic and, from this time on, developed a very deep involvement and commitment to SCAR. We went together to the Jackson Hole meeting in 1974, where Nigel was made the Chairman of the Conservation sub committee and it was a very great pleasure to me that Nigel had joined the BAS team and that we were able to work together in the SCAR context and to make, I think, a major impact upon the biological side of SCAR, so that over that period the biologists had a very important contribution and influence. Later, Nigel became involved in Antarctic Treaty matters, basically through the conservation and environmental aspects of the minerals negotiations and, of course, all these activities took up a great deal of time and an increasing amount of time. It's true, I think to say, that Nigel is now, and has been for some years, the most influential person in the field of Antarctic conservation, to which he has made an outstanding contribution.

In all this, he's still found time to publish several books. He published a book on whales in 1980, on Seals and Man in '82 and, with David Walton, edited the Key Environments Antarctica book, which has become very influential at this very important time for Antarctic development.

He had many other interests, of course, and I can only mention a few, but he was elected Chairman of the Mammal Society in '81 and four years later he became the President. Under his guidance and leadership, the Mammal Society really got on its feet and he was very successful in pursuing its interests. He was elected a Fellow of the Institute of Biology and he has been on the editorial board of a number of journals. He's also had a continuing association with the Zoological Society since the 1950's, though I gather he's not too happy about the way it's going at the moment.

In recent years, as the Deputy Director of BAS, he brought his very great experience and ability to the role, at a difficult time of transition for the Survey, a time when we were battling with NERC and a time when continuity was desperately needed, over the period of the change of Directors. Like David, I've appreciated his great support in very trying days

and I think that Nigel doesn't really realise quite how much that good advice, support and counsel meant at those difficult times to me.

His main contribution to BAS, as I see it, was that he built up an outstanding biological team within the Survey, which has I think undoubtedly become pre-eminent internationally. He has absolute integrity, reliability and loyalty, both to his Director and to the organisation. He fought hard for his own division, of course, but not all the battles can be won and when the decision went against him, as it sometimes did, he accepted it without question and carried on for the better advantage of BAS as a whole. As Director, I always knew that the advice he gave would be objective, impartial and helpful and, of course last but not least, his very considerable skills as a writer and speaker have been invaluable in difficult times.

His main regret, I suspect, is not having made use of the enormous amount of whale material that was available at South Georgia when he was there. I felt the same in the very much shorter time that I spent at South Georgia – I only had about ten months there in the fifties.

His main irritation, he tells me, is that the names of not greatly distinguished people have been applied to geographical features at Bird Island and elsewhere in South Georgia, and his main disappointment, I think, is the loss of the research facilities at South Georgia.

My main regret is that, unlike David, I've never had the opportunity to spend time in the field with Nigel. Our paths have meant that we've had to be separate for most of the time. But I have realised what I've lost on the few occasions when we've managed to get to some Californian island to study seals together in the course of a SCAR meeting. And in New Zealand, when we also thought, you remember Nigel, that we'd been marooned because the helicopter we were expecting to take us off the island didn't turn up on time. We were both, I think, looking forward to [laughter] having a longer period there. And that was an island, incidentally, which had a new species of fur seals for both of us.

In his retirement, he will have more time for the garden and, as many of you will know, he is a perfectionist in that respect and his garden is such that it leaves the rest of us in shame. He'll complete three books on whales, seals and Antarctic conservation and undertake more writing, I'm sure. There is no doubt that he'll continue his involvement in Antarctic conservation, in which he's played such an important role and in which his contribution and influence can't be allowed to disappear.

All your friends, Nigel, thank you for your great contribution to BAS, particularly in the last few years, but for the fourteen years in which you've been a full member of the Survey, ignoring the question about the Bay of Isles. We thank Jennifer too for her involvement and support of you and help to many people in the Survey and we thank you both for your friendship and wish you well in your retirement. [applause].

David Drewry : Thank you very much, Dick, and I'm sure every one of us here and those who couldn't unfortunately be present, would really like to echo your thoughts. We really do send out our best wishes to you, Nigel, and Jennifer. And on behalf of all of us here, that is BAS and SMRU and from the bases in the Antarctic and on the ships, we would like to present you with two or three gifts. First of all, just so you don't lose your way, you may find something there to continue your travels in the future, using it as not a pocket edition, but something you can peruse at your leisure. Something here, which may sort of record for a certain degree of posterity, some of the sort of more interesting elements that appear on the

television of whatever variety you wish to record [sound of paper being rustled] [laughter]. It won't go amiss [laughter]. And finally, we have a card here that has been specially prepared and I'm sure that many people will, may want to look at this. Unfortunately, Jean Vaughan could not be with us, who has had a significant hand in its production, but nevertheless we would like to present that to you.

So, Nigel, thank you very much indeed. We look forward to seeing you, but leisurely, in your retirement.

Nigel Bonner : Thank you very much [applause]. [laughter].

David Drewry : And we should at this stage remember that, as we have heard, Jennifer has shared many experiences with you, not only in support in more recent years, but of course working in South Georgia, maintaining a family in that environment and we would like to present something to you and Sheila Anderson from SMRU would like to do this.

Jennifer : Thank you Sheila.

Sheila Anderson : To Jennifer who has given so much and is always smiling [applause].

Nigel Bonner : Well, David, Dick, Sheila, everybody, what can I say? I suppose it's one of the most difficult introductions for somebody who's expected to say something, that he's been referred to as an outstanding speaker [lots of laughter], something that I hadn't appreciated at all. I've acquired considerable experience in delivering the goods at this sort of occasion, but this is my first, and I suspect last, opportunity to say something in reply.

Joanna Rae phoned me up this morning and said, would I mind if the, if it was tape-recorded. Well, of course, I was very flattered. What could I say, but yes please. But on the other hand, you feel that if somebody's going to record it, then you're required to say something profound and I suppose I should have thought of something profound to say, but I haven't. The most profound thing I can think to say today is that Canada has become a member of the Antarctic Treaty Organisation. [laughter].

An occasion like this is necessarily a moving one. It's a happy occasion when one looks around and sees so many people who have taken the trouble to come to my party on this day and it's especially gratifying that it's not just those people who work most closely with me in the Life Sciences Division and later in the Directorate, but also people from the other divisions, people who've left BAS, people from SMRU, of course, with whom I've always had a very close contact. And that really is a very gratifying thing to observe. At the same time, of course, it's a sad occasion for me. I don't suppose anybody at my comparatively small age of sixty and a few months feels that they need to retire, we accept the policy of our employers, but I don't leave BAS thinking, "Oh well, thank God that's over, now I can go and please myself for a bit", because in fact I've been pleasing myself for the last fourteen years at BAS and, indeed, all my life [laughter]. I've been extraordinarily fortunate because I've never at any period in my life found myself doing a job that I didn't thoroughly enjoy. I even enjoyed most of my time at school.

BAS has been particularly rewarding for me because I fell deeply in love with the Antarctic in the fifties and BAS of course has been a way of maintaining a physical relationship with the Antarctic. But a great deal of my satisfaction in working for BAS has come because of the

sorts of personal relationships we enjoy in the Survey. There's a degree of friendliness and support, which extends from the most junior and most recent recruit right up to the directorate and although that's not always present, I mean it's potentially present. In many cases, it's actually present. And the friendship and support that I received, first as head of the Life Sciences Division and later as Deputy Director, has made this job very much worthwhile. It's not always been an easy job. In the seventies, BAS was going through a difficult time and we did have to bite the bullet on many occasions. We've more recently received much more in the way of material support and also moral support from the government, you might say. But the question of deploying new-found resources has not always, in fact not ever, been an easy one to answer and quite a lot of people, particularly in Admin Division and the division heads, have acquired quite a few grey hairs in the process of coping with this.

Both David Drewry and Dick Laws have said some very kind things about me. I have enjoyed working for both of them, as indeed I enjoyed working for Raymond Priestley, the first Director of BAS, or FIDS as it was then, and Vivian Fuchs after him. I think that functioning in that sort of support role is quite a challenging experience, but I have very much enjoyed it. I felt that I was perhaps of a little more assistance to David than I was to Dick, because I was always so very aware, in Dick's case, that he too worked in the same field of zoology as I did and I have to say that he was so very much more able. David I felt I could teach a little about biology [laughter], and quite obviously I did. I hope I didn't preach to him too much or push him too violently off the rock that he was about to stand on. I may say that he taught me quite a lot about glaciology and geomorphology as we walked about South Georgia and the other places we visited.

I would like particularly to thank the people who have organised this occasion, because it must be very apparent to everyone that it was not something which was "simply" organised. This has been a really outstanding display, it looks a little bit battered now but that's to be expected. But it really looked magnificent when we came in. I just hope somebody took a photograph of it, but I don't suppose anybody did, did they? Dear oh dear! Well, I shall remember it anyway.

I also of course must thank you very much for my presents and perhaps I should open those now so as to see what I've got. They have been rather well described I think. I shall take them in the order in which they lie, not in the order necessarily in the order [inaudible]. This looks very promising [laughter] [sounds of present being unwrapped].

My wife always undoes wrapping paper with a razor blade [laughter]. But I'm not going to take the time to do that.

Dick Laws : Where's your Swiss Army knife, Nigel? [laughter].

Nigel Bonner : Well, I can see what this is and I must say that I'm very, very pleased to have this because this is something that Jennifer and I have been saying we would like to have so much, to ensure that we don't miss these vital programmes about nature. There's also the point that I now have some of my early South Georgia film on videotape, because Graham Creelman organised the transfer of some of this film. We no longer have an operatable 16mm projector at home, but we have got a videotape. Or at least I haven't got it, because Archives have got it, they haven't given it back to me [laughter]. But when they give it back to me, then we can play it on this machine and enjoy watching it. [sounds of unwrapping present].

Well that's, that's magnificent. I've still got a few places left to see. And it's visibly quite so easy to get round to them now that I shan't have BAS picking up the bill for my travel. But I can spend hours and hours just looking at maps and thinking about the places they represent. So I shall enjoy that very greatly also. In fact, we will both enjoy that.

Thank you very much, not just for the presents, not just for the, the occasion, magnificent as it was, but particularly for your companionship and your support over so many years. Thank you very much [applause].