

Professor A. J. E. Cave

1900–2001



Few have served the Zoological Society of London longer or more faithfully than Alexander Cave who died on 17 May at the great age of 100.

As a Fellow, his record is outstanding: Member of Council, Vice President, Silver Medallist of the Society, Honorary Research Associate; and withal, an unending stream of original papers on various aspects of comparative anatomy. Unending? Well, almost, for he was still being published in his 95th year. Nor should be forgotten the great volume of work that he did in refereeing papers for the *Journal of Zoology* – an onerous and time-consuming task that he dealt with meticulously.

Born in Manchester on 13 September 1900, he was a Victorian, and something of that period clung to him: in his dress, in his splendid use of the English language, and, yes, his gentle gallantry with the ladies.

He qualified from Manchester High School and the Victoria University of Manchester as M.B., CH.B. in 1923, and within a year had decided to make his career in anatomy. As a student he had sat at the feet of Stopford, a considerable anatomist, and Geoffrey Jefferson, the eminent neurosurgeon, both subsequently knighted, and possibly their influence was decisive. In 1924 we find him in Leeds where he spent 10 years, first as Senior Demonstrator and then Lecturer in Anatomy under Professor J. K. Jamieson. Cave frequently spoke of J. K. whom he revered, and I believe that one of his favourite dicta 'anatomy teaches precision' derives from Jamieson.

We next meet Cave at University College London. Sir Grafton Elliot Smith had just retired but was still to be found around his department, and Cave met him sufficiently often to fall under his spell. In the biography of Elliot Smith compiled by Warren Dawson, the essay contributed by Cave is not only a superb account of a great scientist but also a witness to Cave's mastery of the written word. Yet, like Goldsmith, he neither enjoyed nor excelled in formal oratory.

From University College, Cave moved to the Royal College of Surgeons where he was Professor of Human and Comparative Anatomy and Conservator of the College Museum from 1935 to 1946. The veteran Sir Arthur Keith was still to be seen 'flitting like a will-o'-the-wisp' around the museum, and for a year or two Cave had as a colleague Wood Jones, who had chosen to end his remarkable career back in London. For both these men, Cave had proper regard, and for Wood Jones, great affection.

Despite the difficulties inseparable from wartime, the Royal College of Surgeons kept going pretty well until May 1941 when a large part of the Hunterian Collection was destroyed by enemy bombing. Of course, it was but one of hundreds of similar grievous losses suffered by London, and no more will be said of it. Instead I turn to July 1962 when a very happy former conservator was one of a large company assembled in the College to welcome the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, as he declared the restored museum open. Cave's services to the Royal College of Surgeons were recognized by

the Council, first by the award of their Fellowship, and then of the much esteemed Wood Jones Medal.

In 1946, Cave was appointed Professor of Anatomy in the University of London at the Medical College of Saint Bartholomew's Hospital, and for the next 21 years he was once again amongst young people, and still handy for London Zoo. On one occasion, remarking to me that his room was a little small, I observed that any room, even one of generous proportions, tends to look cramped when called upon to accommodate two rhinoceros skulls.

His years at Barts were happy ones, and on his retirement the party given by the students was a very special occasion. The Cheshire Cheese in Fleet Street was absolutely packed, with just enough room left for A. J. E. C. and a few of his old friends. Harrison Matthews, Scientific Director of The Zoological Society of London from 1951 to 1966, spoke briefly of Cave's contribution to the Society, and if Alec's response was a touch emotional, why not indeed?

The Zoological Society was one of three learned societies to which Cave gave his allegiance, the others being the Linnean Society and the Anatomical Society of Great Britain and Ireland. Of the Linnean, he was Fellow, Councillor and President – an honour for one who was an amateur botanist. In the Anatomical Society, he was Honorary Secretary and Recorder, Councillor, Vice President and Life Member. I recall with gratitude the solicitude shown me by the Recorder some 62 years ago while preparing to read my very first paper before the Society.

As a teacher, Cave was best with small groups. As an examiner he was patient and thorough: patient, with kindly humour to allay the nerves that affect so many in oral tests, and thorough because that was his way.

He was ever one to whom his professional colleagues would turn for help readily given. On matters of fact he usually had the answer, and when he did not, he could point one in the right direction. On matters of opinion – and in palaeontology such are not scarce – the weightiest authorities felt happier with him on their side.

For 70 years Cave was a prolific author, many of his early papers appearing in the *Journal of Anatomy*. But more and more the *Journal of Zoology* became his vehicle, and it may be of interest to note his most recent papers in the *Journal* (and remember he was born in 1900):

1988 The major intrinsic pancreatic ducts of the rhinoceros. **214**(3): 451–456.

1988 Note on olfactory activity in mysticetes. **214**(2): 307–11.

1992 Canine tooth fracture in two Congolese gorillas. **227**(4): 685–690.

1994 Note on the venous drainage of the gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla*) diploe. **233**(1): 3743.

As a scientist, Cave belonged in a company that is fast disappearing, and among whom may be numbered Owen, Huxley, Keith, Elliot Smith and Wood Jones: all medically qualified, and thoroughly trained in human anatomy with many hours spent on dissection. Turning to comparative anatomy, this proved of immense value, for as pointed out to me by the late F. C. Fraser, one-time cetacean expert at the British Museum and a close friend of Cave, no department of zoology could give their students comparable experience in dissecting a mammal as that once enjoyed in the medical faculty. I say once enjoyed, for today the subject of anatomy is the poor relation in pre-clinical training, and the company referred to above must be regarded as an endangered species.

To all scientists the history of their own subject has special appeal, anatomists no less than others. Fifty years ago Cave's *Ancient Egypt and the origin of anatomical science* told the story in an erudite and wholly satisfying way. It remains a *tour de force*, and if only the last sentence is quoted it is because no more need be said: 'Anatomy as a scientific discipline came to life in Alexandria, the fruit of the Greek seed in the womb of Egypt'.

No account of Cave's life would be other than woefully incomplete were no mention to be made of his deep religious faith. For him the Roman Catholic Church was the source of ultimate truth, and in his devotion thereto he fully met every obligation laid upon him. For many years he was a lay brother in a monastic order, and for me at any rate there was nothing anomalous in beholding a critical, distinguished scientist clad in the robes of the brethren. In parenthesis as it were, it is a common fallacy to regard all scientists as irreligious: far from it, and writing from Edinburgh may I remind those who care about such things, that Scotland's greatest scientist, James Clerk Maxwell, was an Elder of the Kirk.

Straight as a die, and generous as the day, Cave was a very kind and a very loveable man. And so, as so often seems to be, he had his share of human frailties. But they were amiable weaknesses, redeeming foibles as one might say, such as the Unco Guid could well be doing with.

His last few years were spent in the loving care of Nazareth House, and his 100th birthday party was a very happy occasion. He was twice married, and is survived by the daughter of his first marriage.

By his death, the Zoological Society of London has lost a man whose search for objective truth never flagged, and whose high standards throughout a long life never varied by a hairbreadth.

ELDRED WALLS