

## NORTH, FREDERICK JOHN (1889 - 1968), geologist, educator, historian of science and museum curator

**Name:** Frederick John North

**Date of birth:** 1889

**Date of death:** 1968

**Spouse:** Ellen M. North (née Pierce)

**Gender:** Male

**Occupation:** geologist, educator, historian of science and museum curator

**Area of activity:** Education; History and Culture; Literature and Writing; Nature and Agriculture; Science and Mathematics

**Author:** Douglas Anthony Bassett

Born in London in 1889 of a Welsh mother and an English father, he left school at 14 and learnt his geology in evening classes whilst working in a chemical factory and as a laboratory assistant (later a demonstrator) in King's College, University of London. He took an external degree, with 1st - class honours, at that University, before joining the staff of the National Museum of Wales where he served for 42 years, initially as assistant keeper of the Department of Geology and from 1919 to 1959 as Keeper; from 1959 to 1960 he was Honorary Keeper of the newly created Department of Industry.

His interest in geology and its allied sciences was catholic, as expressed in two hundred or so articles and twelve books. He excelled in compilative writing, as seen in books such as *The slates of Wales* (1925); *Coal, and the coalfields in Wales* (1926); *The evolution of the Bristol Channel with special reference to the coast of South Wales* (1929); *Limestones, their origins, distribution, and uses* (1930); *Studies in the origin of the scenery of Wales, 1 - The river scenery at the head of the Vale of Neath* (1930); and, with Bruce Campbell and Richenda Scott, *Snowdonia: The National Park of Wales* (1948). He paid particular attention to the study of maps: his published works include *Geological maps: their history and development, with special reference to Wales* (1928); *The map of Wales [before 1600 A.D.]* (1935); and *Humphrey Lhuyd's maps of England and Wales* (1937), which remains the definitive monograph.

He was one of the most active historians of geology of his time. Each of his compilative books contains a wealth of historical material and he also wrote monographs on a number of the nineteenth-century pioneers of geology - **W.D. Conybeare**, Dean William Buckland, Charles Lyell and particularly H.T. de la Beche, founder of the Geological Survey of Great Britain, the Museum of Practical Geology and the Royal School of Mines. He contributed many items to *DWB*. He maintained an active interest in the history of industry in Wales, particularly the extractive industries, and in essence was the founder of the Department of Industry which was formed at the National Museum in 1958. He was always interested in the connection of geology with other subjects, as seen in *The stones of Llandaff Cathedral* (1958), *Sunken cities, some legends of the coast and lakes of Wales* (1957) and *Mining for metals in Wales* (1962).

He was a proficient curator who built up the Department of Geology at the National Museum and who wrote a great deal on the work of a museum curator, including a standard guide, *Geology in museums* (1939). He was a keen advocate of the museum profession - a long-serving Council member of the Museums Association, President in 1952-53, for many years Chairman of the Education Committee, architect of the Association's first Diploma, member of the Joint Committee with the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust; he was also a member of the National Co-operative Body for Museums for UNESCO. He was above all an ardent educator and proselytizer of his subject, an indefatigable lecturer, reviewer and annalist. He acted regularly as a consultant geologist for public bodies on water conservation projects and on quarrying ventures, and his contributions were recognised as President (and winner of the Gold Medal) of the South Wales Institute of Engineers, as an Honorary Fellow of the Institute of Quarrying and the Permanent Way Institute and as a member of a Committee on the slate industry appointed by the Ministry of Works.

He was awarded a D.Sc. by the University of London in 1920 for research work on fossil brachiopods, an O.B.E. in 1949 'for services to science in Wales', and an Honorary D.Sc. in the same year in the citation for which is stated: 'For him a museum is essentially an interpreter's house'.

He married Ellen M. Pierce, Ticehurst, in May 1915. He died 23 July 1968 at 19 Charget Road, Cardiff.

### Author

**Douglas Anthony Bassett**, (1927 - 2009)

### Sources

Obit. Notice, Museums Association *Monthly Bulletin*, 1968

reference to his work on De la Beche in the foreword to *Henry de la Beche observations on an observer* (1977) (Cardiff 1977)

and a brief list of publications in *Amgueddfa newyddion Amgueddfa Genedlaethol Cymru newsletter of the National Museum of Wales* (Cardiff 1969-1976, 1985-1987, 1988-1994) 15, Winter, 1973

Personal details from his daughter, Laura North

### Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [F. J. North](#)

### Additional Links

Wikidata: [Q18640690](#)

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