

## Obituary: Dr Anita McConnell FRGS FRSA FRMetS (1936–2016)

Journal ISSN number: 2054-5770

This article was written by [Jane Insley](#)

07-06-2016 Cite as 10.15180; 160611 Obituary

[Obituary: Dr Anita McConnell FRGS FRSA FRMetS \(1936–2016\)](#)

Published in [Autumn 2016, Issue 06](#)

Article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/160611>

### Keywords

Obituary, Anita McConnell

### Obituary: Dr Anita McConnell

Historians of science were saddened to hear of the death of Dr Anita McConnell in April 2016 at the age of 80. Her research output was prodigious in the histories of the earth sciences, scientific instrument-making and scientific biography, she authored 17 books, and was awarded fellowships of the Royal Geographical Society, Royal Society of Arts and Royal Meteorological Society. Although her entry in the Science Museum's *Science for the Nation* only describes her as a Senior Curator between 1985 and 1988, she started work there as a Museum Assistant in December 1963, and went on to coordinate the removal of railway material from Clapham to what would become the National Railway Museum in York. She also ran the Science Museum's store at Hayes in Middlesex, prepared permanent displays of oceanography and geophysics in 1977 along with their attendant catalogues and handbooks, and embarked on a body of research work that stands as her testimony.

Much of what follows comes from a memoir that Anita was asked to write a few weeks before her death. She was born on 22 January 1936 of Italian parents who both worked in the catering trade. With the outbreak of the Second World War her father was prevented from working, so her British mother had to support the family. Anita was sent to live with her maternal grandmother. Because of wartime conditions, including being evacuated and then sent to a Devon boarding school, she obtained only a sketchy primary education, but at the age of 10 she took and passed the 11-plus. On returning to the family's London home in Barnes she rarely saw her parents, who worked long hours and late shifts, but at grammar school she passed her School Certificate in English language, French, Latin, mathematics and general science. She failed at Latin, but I recall her catching up at evening classes during the period when we shared an office – and long musings on what colour exactly was meant by the phrase 'wine-dark sea'.

Anita left school aged 16 with a strong work ethic and a passionate desire for further education. For the first of a series of low-paid jobs she took advantage of a labour exchange scheme where London children went to work on farms, choosing to go to south Shropshire. Acquiring a shotgun and exploiting her ability to shoot rabbits allowed her to supplement her meagre pay. With post-war recession, she had to go back to London, where her mother paid for her to have driving lessons. Having already driven tractors and motorbikes she soon passed her test, and went to work for a garage in Notting Hill.

In 1956 Anita joined her father briefly in catering for the film crew and actors on *Yangtse Incident*, shooting in Essex. This was the beginning of a series of short-term catering jobs on film locations, one of which was feeding the crew making *The Key*, directed by Carol Reed and starring Trevor Howard. This production was shot at sea in the English Channel, which meant the cooks beneath the vessel's decks faced a challenging task during rough weather. Other work followed – three films set in the Scottish Highlands south of Oban, including *I Know Where I'm Going*; then *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*, with Ingrid Bergman (in a studio lot outside London). Six months filming in Ceylon for *The Bridge on the River Kwai* was a complicated opportunity to travel as far east as she ever went.

Alongside driving jobs, Anita pursued a new interest in archaeology – two years of a four-year evening course were tough going, but changing to a job at the Science Museum in 1963 (entry-level qualifications being four O levels) allowed more time for study. The rest of the course was much easier, and she gained her diploma in archaeology from the University of London in 1967. Further foreign travel followed.

Through work she met Dennis McConnell, the ex-army son of a Scot, brought up in Uruguay. Both were interested in furthering themselves through education, so they saved money by moving in together, and marrying in 1963 to ease the burden of income tax. They continued to support each other's studies, but also managed cheap travel on the continent. Both became mature students, with grants: Dennis at LSE and Anita at UCL, where she picked physical geography as being relevant to her Science Museum work. The Museum gave her three years' unpaid study leave. Dennis finished his degree but without shining, and returned to lorry-driving. Anita got an upper second-class degree in August 1971, returned to the Science Museum and began a part-time MSc in the history of technology at Imperial College.

At work, her task was to move collections from London to York for the future National Railway Museum; after two more years at the Museum's stores at Hayes she returned to South Kensington to become Curator of Oceanography and Geophysics, charged with both extracting collections from deep storage and preparing an exhibition gallery. At this point she parted company with her husband in a difficult divorce. Plunging into work, she realised that the oceanographic work could form the basis of a thesis, enrolling at the University of Leicester under Dr Alex Keller. Publications followed, on both topics, including catalogues and general histories.

**Figure 1**



© Science Museum/Science & Society Picture Library

Model of the interior of the chemistry laboratory inside H.M.S. Challenger, 1872-1876. Anita McConnell undertook research into the history of oceanography and became Curator of Oceanography and Geophysics at the Science Museum, London.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/160611/002>

I recall Anita firstly as a colleague, sharing the next-door office in the Post Office block, and arranging the photography of the barometers in the collection for the Shire booklet about them, then as a ferocious project coordinator for the *Telecommunications* gallery where the curators, Keith Geddes and Eryl Davies, referred to her as the 'Arse Biter'. I later shared an office with her myself, doing similar work for the *Exploration of Space* exhibition, becoming 'Arse Biter Mark II'. Eventually I became her assistant, and then her successor as Curator of Earth Sciences.

As can be seen from the list of her published books below, few carry the Science Museum (or HMSO) imprint. Research opportunities were hard-won, and by 1987 Anita's frustration at lack of support for the kind of work she preferred to do led her to go freelance, with one notable venture being a catalogue of the instruments belonging to the Ordnance Survey. Not all her ideas came to fruition, but one of the more successful was a trading business in historic barometers with Patrick Marney (a barometer specialist), which ran for 22 years. This resulted in papers and visits to places such as the Mariners' Museum in Virginia to produce a catalogue.

Anita also worked on the history of Cooke, Troughton and Simms for Vickers Instruments and the University of York, and was commissioned by the late Gerry Martin to write a survey of the networks bringing knowledge of glassworking for optical uses to the London trade between 1500 and 1900. This was not published at the time, but is currently in press. She also worked at the Royal Institution, the National Museum of Scotland, the Musée Océanographique in Monaco, and the Whipple Museum of the History of Science at Cambridge, in a variety of capacities. She combined this with ten years of voluntary work as a magistrate for the City of London.

In 1993 Oxford University Press proposed a revision of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. One of the first blocks was business history, with a section for instrument- and clock-makers, and Anita was invited to become the Research Editor for that block. Her work involved finding suitable authors for updated and new entries, by default writing them herself. She went on to work on the blocks for science, medicine and art (engravers), as her research skills made her particularly useful in searching specialist London libraries. She provided more entries than any other single contributor, some 600 articles, before retiring in 2004.

In 2005, aged 69, Anita decided that living in London was too expensive, and moved to a converted farm labourer's cottage in a small village outside Stowmarket. Her new home had convenient rail access to London and to Cambridge, where she became an affiliated research scholar at the Department of the History and Philosophy of Science. Further travel took her to Brazil, Punta Arenas, Tahiti, Easter Island, Ethiopia, Syria, Mauritius, Uzbekistan, the Galapagos and elsewhere. She stayed in Monaco and Genoa with friends, and worked on seismological history with Graziano Ferrari and oceanographic history with Giorgio Dragoni, both based in Italy.

However, after life in the country became more difficult, Anita eventually moved to Girton, north of Cambridge. Shorter trips abroad were made with friends, one of the last being to Dresden. This was to receive the Paul Bunge Prize on behalf of the Scientific Instrument Society, for the late Brian Gee's book *Francis Watkins and the Dollond Telescope Patent Controversy*, on which she was joint editor with Dr Alison Morrison-Low. The prize money went to the student fund of the society, supporting young academics in museum projects.

**Figure 2**



© Jane Insley

Anita McConnell, Basel Botanic Garden, April 2016.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/160611/003>

Anita's published output was prodigious; some of the more important works are listed below, but readers of the *Scientific Instrument Society Bulletin* may know of the articles Alison Morrison-Low and I wrote with Anita describing our visits to collections and exhibitions during the 1990s and early 2000s. 'Travel broadens the mind,' our mentor told us: but it also made us think harder about the collections we cared for, their contexts nationally and internationally, and what should be added to them. She encouraged us to write and discuss historical problems. We will miss her and her critical mind.

## Key works

- 1980, *Geomagnetic Instruments Before 1900: An Illustrated Account of their Construction and Use* (London: Harriet Wynter)
- 1980, additional material for Six, J, *The Construction and Use of a Thermometer* (London: Nimbus Books)
- 1981, *Historical Instruments in Oceanography: Background to the Oceanography Collection at the Science Museum* (London: HMSO)
- 1982, *No Sea Too Deep: The History of Oceanographic Instruments* (Bristol: Adam Hilger)
- 1985 (with Lambert, D), *Seas and Oceans* (London: Orbis Publications)
- 1985, *The World Beneath Us* (London: Orbis Publications)
- 1986, *Geophysics & Geomagnetism: Catalogue of the Science Museum Collection* (London: Science Museum)
- 1986, 'The scientific life of William Scoresby Jnr., with a catalogue of his instruments and apparatus in the Whitby Museum', *Annals of Science*, 43, pp257–86
- 1988, *Barometers* (Princes Risborough: Shire Publications)
- 1989, 'Aluminium and its alloys for scientific instruments, 1855–1900', *Annals of Science*, 46, pp611–20
- 1990, 'Directory of source material for the history of oceanography', UNESCO Technical Paper in Marine Science, UNESCO, Paris
- 1992, *Instrument Makers to the World: A History of Cooke, Troughton & Simms* (York: William Sessions/University of York)
- 1993, *R B Bate of the Poultry 1782–1847: The Life and Times of a Scientific Instrument Maker* (London: Scientific Instrument Society)
- 1994, 'From craft workshop to big business – the London scientific instrument trade's response to increasing demand, 1750–1820', *London Journal*, 19/1, pp36–53
- 1994 (with Wallis, H), *Historian's Guide to Early British Maps: A Guide to the Location of Pre-1900 Maps of the British Isles Preserved in the United Kingdom and Ireland* (Cambridge: CUP)
- 1998, *King of the Clinicals: The Life and Times of J J Hicks* (York: William Sessions)
- 1999, translation, introduction and notes for Marsigli, L F, *Natural History of the Sea* (Bologna: Museo di Fisica dell'Università di Bologna)
- 2007 (with Campbell, R J and Savours, A), Beals, H K (ed.), *Four Travel Journals: The Americas, Antarctica and Africa, 1775–1874*, Hakluyt Society, Third Series (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing)

2007, *Jesse Ramsden (1735–1800): London's Leading Scientific Instrument Maker* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing)

2014 (ed. with Morrison-Low, A D), Gee, B, *Francis Watkins and the Dollond Telescope Patent Controversy* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing)

Component DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/160611/001>

## Tags

- [Scientific instruments](#)
- [Biography](#)
- [Oceanographic instruments](#)

## Author information



**Jane Insley**

Doctoral student

[Contact this author >](#)

Jane Insley is a doctoral student at the UCL Institute of Education.