

Words for Robert Bates

Rocknockers owe thee, Dr. Bates,
For founding what we needed:
A geowriting column that
Amused us (but we heeded).

These are the opening lines of *Owed to Robert L. Bates* in The Geological Column in the September 1994 *Geotimes*.

(I interrupt this obituary to comment on the use of sic. [Those of you who knew Robert Bates' work will know that he would have found such an interruption wonderfully appropriate, and recognised it as a gesture of respect.] *Sic* is a latin word, meaning literally 'thus' or 'so'. *Sic gloria transit*, and all that. [A Christmas treat for the trivia lovers: who said she was Gloria and in what movie?]¹ However (comma) it is also used in writing to declare that a particular expression, word or spelling is deliberately used [literally, thus used], and is not an error or misspelling. It is most commonly used when a quotation contains words or facts that the reader is likely to consider erroneous.

'The survival of the fattest (sic) among early settlers has been cited as a genetic factor in the common obesity in North America'. The sic assures the reader that it is *fattest*, not *fittest*, that is intended here. Hence, I could have added sic after *Owed to Robert Bates* to confirm that I meant *Owed*, not *Ode*. Sic should be used sparingly and isn't used when you deliberately err for effect.. Nor should it be used to draw attention to minor errors in an opponent's grammar; that is not considered good form - but it's awfully tempting!

Robert Latimer Bates, 82, Professor Emeritus at Ohio State University, geologist, science writer, and editor, died in Columbus, Ohio on June 21, 1994. I learnt of it only today while searching for a book review that I wanted to quote in this column. He would have enjoyed the quote.

'Most (of the papers) are nonsensical exercises in hooking meaningless words into impossible sentences and inane paragraphs in as many ways as can be imagined²

I knew it was a review of a book about mass-extinctions but I'd forgotten which magazine, and was skimming through the several *Geotimes* that arrived last week when I came upon the news of Bates' death. How appropriate that I read it in The Geological Column that Bates himself began 28 years ago.

Bates first wrote The Geological Column for the American Geological Institute's

(AGI) monthly *Geotimes* journal in 1966 and filed copy every month until he retired in 1987. For all those years, I was one of many who, whenever the new issue arrived, turned first to the back page to read Bates' latest pronouncements about the use and abuse of English by geologists and others.

Dr Bates' scientific specialty was non-metallic earth minerals and he wrote several important books on the subject. The most recent was *Industrial minerals: Geology and World Deposits* (with P.W. Harben). He also wrote several books for younger and non-technical readers, most notably *Our Modern Stone Age*, which proclaimed how important geology is to the world's health and wealth. The younger generation of today's geologists know him mainly as the compiler of AGI's *Glossary of Geology*.

It was that monthly column (comma) however (comma) that brought him the most recognition. At an award ceremony in 1981, the column was described as 'the geologic communicator's conscience... the most widely read part of *Geotimes* and probably the most widely read of any contribution to the geologic literature'. Initially he wrote the column himself but it drew such a great response from readers that it evolved into 'something of a contributors' forum', as Bates described it. He delighted in this exchange of words.

A selection of his favourite pieces was published as *Pandora's Bauxite: The Best of Bates* by AGI in 1986. The title comes from a column about mineral names such as matterhornblende, a Swiss ferromagnesian mineral, and the South American copper ore, guatamalachite. He loved such word games (he could have been a sedimentologist but he settled down too quickly; he could have been a phosphate producer but he didn't have the apatite; so he turned to the driller and said "Derek..."; ... to the palynologist and said "Fern...") This love was also evident in the witty verses he wrote about the pterosaur of Ptexas, and such things.

He ridiculed what today is called politically-correct language: changing *Chairman* to *chair*, for example. Does that make the banquet chairman a dining-room chair, he wondered. I notice too, as I flip through *Pandora's Bauxite*, that he was already fighting in the early 1980s against imprecise complex nouns. Sometimes the problem is punctuation (a mean dip map; a vibrating equipment

manager) but the real mutants are bred when noun phrases are abbreviated by reversing the order of words: *reclamation of abandoned mines* becomes *abandoned mine reclamation*. (The renewed popularity of this malopropish pursuit was evident in the WABS Proceedings; the best was given a Scottie at the Awards Dinner: *aborted rift discoveries*)

Bates commented once: 'It's been said that the language is the only natural resource that can be mined indefinitely without depletion. I enjoy mining it.' He mined it well and minded it as best he could. As the *Geotimes* obituary concluded, 'his leadership in showing the geological community how to discover and extract the riches of the language continues to be an example for all geologists'.

I intended this column to speak of other things but have been reminded again how monthly columns, like life, are not fond of the order we would impose on them. The chance discovery of this sad news has led me elsewhere.

How frequently chance plays such a key role in these things: the geology book that catches the eye while you're looking along a shelf for another volume; the journal that arrives the morning you have to finish a report; the person you met at the party you didn't mean to go to. (On my first day on Sydney University campus 30 years ago, I was late for the 'orientation' lecture and was ushered to the spare seat in the front row, where I was very taken with the young woman beside me, and I read her name on the form she was holding and wrote it in a notebook I still have - and in a few minutes, I will enjoy reminding her of this when she edits this column!)

My aspiration to write a column about words had its beginnings among Dr Bates' columns long ago. 'Geoscientists keep finding ingenious new ways to butcher the language', Bates wrote, 'and it's sort of fun to keep score'. I found myself thinking I'd like to do that one day: help keep score.

So here we are, Dr Bates, following your footsteps in the siliclasts of time. We owe you.

A merry Xmas. An interesting New Year. And may Robert Bates be with you in your writing.

Peter Purcell

¹ Elizabeth Taylor in *Butterfield 8*

² *Mass-Extinction Debates: How Science works in a Crisis*. Reviewed by D Baars, *Geotimes*, September 1994