Introduction

Many people – and I am one of them – think that the Lake District is the most beautiful and finest part of England. That is why so many people go there every year. Moreover, although the region is surely a place of great geological interest, its very beauty may well account for the fact that so many geologists have chosen to work there, selecting it for their special area of research. For surely it is a region that one can love, as much as study. I candidly acknowledge that I chose to carry out my investigations for the present book because of my devotion to the region. I lived there when I was a small boy during World War II, and always wanted to return, to get to know the place better. This prospect was so attractive that I made it my first and major preoccupation upon my retirement in 1996.

Uncharitable critics may think that my task has been a case of self-indulgence. They may, I admit, be a little bit right. Even so, I think that my occupation has been honourable, and justifiable as a contribution to the history of science. For I like to think that I have opened a new doorway in the study of the history of geology. My aim has been to show how, in all their complexity and detail, the current ideas about the geology of a particular region have been arrived at, right to the ‘present’ – in this case to the end of the second millennium. A similar task has not, so far as I am aware, been attempted hitherto for any specific region of the globe. And, by concentrating on my chosen region, I wish to reveal much about the history of geology in Britain in the last two hundred years – the time during which geological research has been pursued in a scientific manner in the Lake District. Thus the region provides a kind of lens through which one may examine the history of geology itself, revealing the changing styles of work, changing social relationships, the changing social environment in which geology operates, changing techniques of research, and the changing theories that have been devised in order to understand the structure of the Earth, its ‘workings’ and its fascinating history.

Of course, such a study must necessarily have a ragged ending. It cannot be one in which all details of the plot are finally made clear, and the story or play achieves its happy conclusion. It is not even like the historical study of a scientific controversy, where we know what the final consensus is; in which case our task is simply to show how that consensus was accomplished. On the contrary, the study of Lakeland geology is anything but complete, and if we are to judge by the continuing flood of publications on the area, not to mention changing notions about the nature of science that one may derive from the literature on the philosophy and sociology of science, or possible future major changes in geological theory, it never will be complete. On the other hand, though the story seems to get ever more complicated as we approach the present, rather than the plot being nearly concluded, it does have a kind of denouement, as we shall see. Thus I have chosen to bring my narrative to a close at the end of the year 2000, which provides a natural ending of a sort.

Of course, for those who want a finished story, my task is inherently unsatisfactory and incapable of adequate accomplishment. Nevertheless, I believe it has been worth the undertaking. First, it allows one to take stock of the present situation, to see how we have reached our present position in the understanding of the geology of this interesting and beloved region. Second, as said, it provides one way, at least, of writing the history of British geology, and more generally of the development of at least some aspects of geological method and theory. Third, it brings into focus the changes that have occurred over the years in the conduct of geology, from being an agreeable amateur avocation to that of a university discipline or national survey, or the domain of the ‘consultant’, where the cuts and thrusts of politics are at work as people have to battle for funding in a ‘corporatized’ world. Fourth, it explores aspects of the history of the British Geological Survey (BGS) and the relationship of that organization to the university system, and the different ‘interests’ of the two. Fifth, it examines a fascinating episode in the recent history of British science, which was overtly political, and in which one can see remarkable contrasts between the conduct of science in a ‘courtroom situation’ as opposed to within the walls of academe or amongst the usual social community of geologists, whether they be academics or in the ‘private sector’. And sixth, it provides an entrée to the study of many interesting and important persons in the community of British geologists, most of whom are but little known except by a small number of specialist historians, or by geologists themselves, alive and walking today.

On the other hand, I do not offer (for example) a gratifying narrative of the relationship between geological science and painting or literature. My story offers nothing for the aesthete, such as the relationship between Goethe’s philosophy and his ideas about the Earth, or the relationship between Ruskin’s or Wordsworth’s ideas about the Earth and the Lakes and their artistic or poetic accomplishments (though when I started this study I thought there might be more to say on such matters than proved to be the case). I offer a much more prosaic product.

One does not even find a roll of celebrated names in the history of geological science in this book. Almost the only person with a leading role whose name is remotely a ‘household word’ is the parson-geologist and nineteenth-century Cambridge professor, Adam Sedgwick – assuredly one of the ‘giants of geology’.

1 Cf. Carol & Mildred Fenton, Giants of Geology (1945).