

Obituary

Peter Speak, a noted geographer and a long-term member of the Scott Polar Research Institute, died on 10 July 2008.

Speak was born on 26 July 1925 in one of the most attractive areas of west Yorkshire, to parents who had both been students at Ruskin College, Oxford. They provided him with a fine upbringing, his main education being completed at Hebden Bridge Grammar School. He was a keen naval cadet, and wished to serve in the Royal Navy, but by a stroke of bad luck he was drafted as a 'Bevin Boy,' one of some 48,000 British conscripts or volunteers who, beginning in December 1943, were sent to the coal mines of the UK rather than to war service. This was a greater penalty than he might have anticipated, as when the compulsory service as a miner ceased, he received no benefits as a veteran.

Speak had been accepted at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, but had little financial support. Yet such was his strength of character and purpose that he was able to give his full attention to his studies in Geography. He had the well-rounded training in that discipline which led, almost naturally, to his interests in polar science. Speak also learnt to play the bassoon, and he acquired an interest in English literature, which in later years was manifested in lectures he gave to visitors to Britain on the Lakeland poets. After completing teacher training, Speak accepted a post at the Cambridge College of Arts and Technology, where he remained until he took retirement in 1987.

Some years before his retirement, Speak took a sabbatical year, which he spent at SPRI, taking the MPhil in Polar Studies, while also becoming a member of St John's College. In 1988 he became course director for the MPhil, and in that position he performed as a splendid supervisor and mentor to students, both to those who did and to those who did not have experience in the polar regions. This was a role for which he was excellently qualified, and those of us who taught from time to time remember well his continuing presence at the lectures, and the great value that he added in the discussion sections

thereafter. Speak also took on a special assignment with students from Valparaiso University in Indiana, and some of them have told me how he mentored them in an exceptionally dedicated way.

Speak made numerous scholarly contributions to knowledge through his publishing. His short text *Map reading and interpretation*, which first appeared in 1964, went into three editions. Along with A.H.C. Carter, he produced the multi-volume series *Sketch-map geographies*. But his major research dealt with the great Scottish explorer W.S. Bruce. For nearly a century, Bruce's official narrative of his 1902–04 Scottish National Antarctic Expedition lay unpublished, but with Speak the driving force behind the project, as well as editing, annotating, and writing an introduction for the manuscript, Edinburgh University Press finally published it in 1992 as *The log of the 'Scotia' expedition*. A little more than a decade later, Speak followed up with a very well received biography, *William Speirs Bruce: polar explorer and Scottish nationalist*.

It should also be recorded that Speak had a large family, and a wonderful wife, Barbara, who encouraged all these activities. I have personally known Peter since 1981, and we remained close friends. It was a great privilege to escort him and Barbara to the Yukon and eastern Alaska, where we followed the Klondike Trail, and interviewed 'old timers' in Dawson City. He again proved a great teacher, explaining from the point of view of a geographer the history of the landscape through which we passed. He will be greatly missed, not only in Cambridge, but across the polar world, where he travelled quite widely.

He lived for many years in the village of Thriplow, where he took great interest in the local architecture, as well as in local musical activities. Almost his final award was the medal belatedly awarded to surviving Bevin Boys. His last book – entitled *Deb: geographer, scientist, Antarctic explorer* – was a biography of Frank Debenham, the founder of SPRI, and appeared shortly before he died.
Ian Whitaker