

FOREWORD



Geophysical Institute, University of Alaska

GORDON ROBIN

After serving as Director of the Scott Polar Research Institute for 24 years Gordon Robin retired on 30 September 1982 under the University's special early retirement scheme. His period of office, which started in 1958, has seen an exceptional development of the Institute alike in its status as a polar centre, in the growth of its research and teaching activities, and in the expansion of the museum, archives and library in a greatly enlarged building. He has given consistent and distinguished leadership over the past quarter century, and a brief appraisal of his work would seem appropriate.

Gordon Robin was born in Australia and graduated from the University of Melbourne in 1940. After war service in the Royal Australian Navy, he came to Birmingham University Physics

Department as a graduate student, and shortly afterwards started his polar career with the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey as officer-in-charge and meteorologist at Signy Island from 1946 to 1948. On his return he was appointed lecturer at Birmingham, but the following year went south again as senior British member of the Norwegian–British–Swedish Antarctic Expedition of 1949–52. On this expedition he carried out with great success the first seismic traverse of part of the Antarctic ice sheet. He returned to Birmingham, completed his PhD, went to the Australian National University for a year, and then returned to England as Director of the Institute.

The highlights of his directorship illustrate the different facets of his activity. Expansion of the research programme had been to some extent envisaged in the General Board's report of 1956, which established four university posts in the Institute including that of full-time Director. On this firm foundation he was able to build energetically, soon securing a fifth appointment—that of librarian. He created the radio echo group which was to be central in the Institute's research programme for many years. In 1979, at his instigation, the General Board again scrutinized the Institute's record, and reported most favourably.

The increased scale of the Institute's activities soon outstripped the capacity of the building to contain them. Gordon Robin was able to persuade the Ford Foundation to make a most generous grant for the erection of a new wing, contrary to their normal policy of not supporting building proposals. The extra space provided—nearly three times that of the old building—included research rooms, laboratories and a cold room, and greatly extended the space available to make the museum attractive and stimulating, not only to the polar fraternity, but also to other members of the University, and to visitors, including children. It also allowed space for the open lectures which are given on most Saturdays during term time; whilst the appearance and layout of the enlarged building forms a pleasing addition to Herbert Baker's original design.

Concerned almost from the start with arrangements for the International Geophysical Year, Gordon Robin was the obvious choice as UK delegate to the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR) of the International Council of Scientific Unions, set up in 1958. He became the committee's first secretary (a position he held until 1970), then served a four-year term as president. Now he remains an honorary member, and the UK delegate. Through this strong connection the Institute has become the location of the SCAR secretariat, and thus at the centre of international coordination of Antarctic science. Gordon Robin has given generous cooperation to the headquarters of the British Antarctic Survey, which moved to Cambridge in 1975, to the considerable benefit of both bodies. On the Arctic side, he kept in close touch with North American advances particularly through his membership, from 1974 to 1981, of the Advisory Board of the University of Alaska's Geophysical Institute.

Gordon Robin's personal standing as a geophysicist and glaciologist has been consistently high. His continuing study of the Antarctic ice sheet, involving several more field trips to Antarctica, led to many publications and earned him a Cambridge Doctorate of Science (1977) and an honorary DPhil of the University of Stockholm (1978). He was awarded the Bruce Medal of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1953 and the Patron's Medal of the Royal Geographical Society in 1974.

As Director, he was capable, imaginative, modest and firm, with an overriding sense of humour. The Institute he moulded has greatly enhanced its considerable reputation in the polar world. By those who worked with him over the years Gordon Robin will perhaps be remembered best for the friendly and informal atmosphere that he encouraged in the Institute, thus perpetuating a tradition which his predecessor, Frank Debenham, was so concerned to foster.

Gordon and his wife Jean plan to remain in Cambridge, and his continuing association with the Institute will be warmly welcomed.

Terence Armstrong
Launcelot Fleming