

OBITUARY

Jessie Sweet

JESSIE MAY SWEET, mineralogist and science historian, died in Edinburgh on 20 November 1979. The daughter of Edward Sweet, banker, and Emily Chapman, Jessie was born on 27 April 1901 and brought up in Wisbech and Boston and later studied science at Edinburgh University where she graduated B.Sc. in geology in 1924. She had to seek employment during the worst period of the depression and counted herself lucky to get a temporary post in the Department of Mineralogy of the British Museum (Natural History) in 1927—the year that the late Dr L. J. Spencer assumed the keepership of the department. She was established in her post just before the Second World War and was promoted to Senior Experimental Officer when the war was over.

While at the Natural History Museum Miss Sweet published on baryte, uigite, plinthite, and tacharanite—the last-named mineral being a new species discovered by her while on holiday in the Isle of Skye at Portree. Her interest in the history of the Museum's mineral collection was quickly aroused and she published short papers on Sir Hans Sloane's minerals, Benjamin Franklin's asbestos purse, and on British gold from the Bouglise collection. Diamonds and their history also interested her and with A. A. Moss she published a note on Mr Clayton's diamond and another on the 'Colenso' diamond with A. G. Couper. It was, however, her devoted service to mineralogy and mineralogists through curation and cataloguing of the national collection during very difficult years which marked her greatest achievement. She was one of the devoted band of civilians who guarded the Natural History Museum by day and night during the London Blitz. After the war she successfully carried through the enormous task of rearranging the systematic collection and reinstating the systematic mineral exhibition. For these services she was honoured with the award of an MBE.

With her health somewhat impaired by the stress of her museum duties, Jessie Sweet retired in 1961 and decided to leave London for more peaceful surroundings. Dr Douglas A. Allan, a friend of university days and then director of the Royal Scottish Museum, invited her to settle in Edinburgh

to continue her historical studies in that museum. In the eighteen years which remained to her she established herself as an authority on the life and work of the controversial Robert Jameson, Professor of Natural History at Edinburgh University from 1804 to 1854, a noted mineralogist, and an important figure in the history of the collections of the Royal Scottish Museum. Founding her work largely on manuscripts in the Edinburgh University Library and on the Pollok-Morris collection, now in that library, she published thirteen papers on Jameson and related subjects which are summarized in her introduction to the facsimile reprint of *The Wernerian Theory of the Neptunian Origin of Rocks*, edited by Professor George W. White, and published by the Haffner Press in 1976. A major paper which gave her great pleasure to research was her study of Matthew Guthrie, an almost forgotten eighteenth-century gemmologist who was responsible for an original classification of gem stones. This, like most of Miss Sweet's later papers, was published in the *Annals of Science*.

Jessie Sweet was elected a member of the Mineralogical Society in 1928 and served on the Council of that Society from 1940 to 1943. She was an abstractor for *Mineralogical Abstracts* from vol. vii (1940) to vol. xiii (1958). When she retired to Edinburgh she was elected a fellow of the Edinburgh Geological Society.

Miss Sweet brought a thoroughness to all she did and paid such scrupulous attention to details that her published work is characterized by a high degree of accuracy. She did not allow herself the luxury of expressing her own opinions but relied on her sources to speak for themselves. Her work and the many friends she made through it were her absorbing interests and she had little time for domesticity. Many scholars have been indebted to her for her generosity in making available to them the results of her unpublished work and for the trouble she took to answer the numerous queries which she received from them. They will be glad to know that her notebooks and manuscripts will be kept for consultation in the archives of the libraries of the Royal Scottish Museum and the British Museum (Natural History).

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