

Pierre Bultynck



Pierre L Bultynck was born in 1938 in the city of Leuven (Belgium) and as the Belgian legislation on retirement prescribes, 65 years later during the year 2003, Pierre Bultynck has retired, both from the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences in Brussels and from the University of Leuven where he was professor of palaeontology.

Too young to have fully experienced the problems of World War II, he went to school, when the massive post-war reconstruction of the country was fully underway. It was a special time with people thinking in terms of challenges and opportunities. In this particular atmosphere he grew up as a student at the Sint Pieters “college” (secondary school) in Leuven, where his teachers aroused his interest in the overwhelming complexity of the cosmos. They suggested that he should start geology studies at the university.

He was not the only student of his generation at the Sint Pieters “college” to enrol for geology at the university. Raoul Ottenburgs, later mineralogist at Leuven University, was in the same form, at the same time. Remarkable indeed, as at that time the study of geology was even more poorly known than it is today. Pierre was one of five geology students who graduated in 1961 – at the brink of the golden sixties that brought almost unlimited hopes. His fellow geology students became a science teacher in secondary school – a very important task and geology’s

best trump card for recruiting new potential geologists –, an entrepreneur and later founding president of a successful research and testing company of natural materials, a university mineralogist and also amongst them was Andre Bastin, a flamboyant oceanographer who also spent some years at the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences (RBINS).

All of them are retiring now and have seen great changes not only in the science of geology, but also in society. When they started their professional career they could not have foreseen that at the end of this career at the occasion of the retirement of Pierre Bultynck, he would be honoured in English, the language that became the new lingua franca.

After graduating in the academic year 1960-1961 Pierre started a research project in Palaeozoic palaeontology and stratigraphy under the supervision of the late Professor Lecompte at Leuven University. He was awarded grants by the National Science Foundation (NFWO) and by the Institute for the Promotion of Research in Agriculture and Industry (IWONL). The subject of his doctoral thesis was “A stratigraphic and palaeontological Study of the Couvinian Type Profile”. Following the steps of his professor he became a specialist in Devonian biostratigraphy. In his work presented in the spring of 1967, he demonstrated the potential of conodonts for Devonian stratigraphy.

In 1968 he was awarded a postdoctoral Alexander von Humboldt research grant.

As the Belgian Devonian was and is a stratigraphic reference area for the whole world, Pierre’s doctoral thesis was very important and led him almost automatically towards international issues in stratigraphy. In 1971 he started a research career at the RBINS in Brussels, where he joined another famous Devonian palaeontology specialist Paul Sartenaer.

Pierre climbed the hierarchical ladder at the institute and retired as head of the Palaeontology Department. His career shows recognition not only of his scientific work but also of his capacity for organizing and inspiring a team.

Pierre not only continued the research on Devonian stratigraphy started by his supervisor Professor Lecompte and by his former head of department P. Sartenaer at the RBINS but has contributed in many innovative ways to the palaeontology research at the RBINS.

Pierre has introduced the use and the development of the conodont microfossil approach in Devonian biostratigraphic research almost to the limits of its potential and that at a time when it was unknown whether this microfossil group had to be considered as belonging to the inver-

tebrates or to the vertebrates. He was honoured for his work by having three conodont species, one otolith taxon and one brachiopod genus named after him.

Stratigraphic stage names on the international Devonian chronostratigraphic table are still sounding very Belgian, or Franco-Belgian if thinking of Givetian. This is to some extent because Pierre's scientific investigations. Of course, in stratigraphic subcommissions one is not supposed to concentrate on defending stratotype areas in one's own backyard. Yet, it is equally true that a potentially good stratotype cannot be kept as an international standard if not studied appropriately and continuously by applying modern methodology, implying evidently a teamwork approach. No wonder therefore that Pierre has co-authored papers with many scientists, both with young starting scientists guided by him previously and also with well-known specialists.

Pierre is also respected internationally. He published Devonian stratigraphy studies carried out in a.o. Belgium, France, Spain, Morocco, Poland, the USA and Canada.

On the national level, he and Léon Dejonghe, managed to get the leading stratigraphers to cooperate in preparing a joint inventory of the lithostratigraphy of our own Belgian geology (*Geologica Belgica* 2001). This is undoubtedly a major achievement that will inspire remakes on the same pattern in the future so as to continuously keep the stratigraphic information up to date.

The so-called quantitative and objective way of demonstrating the importance of his scientific work could have been tried by counting Pierre's publications, by ranking his papers in appropriate categories, finding out how many times they have been cited in other papers, how much external money Pierre has attracted.... all favourite fetishes of modern science managers. A much better and obvious guarantee for the wide appreciation of the quantity and the quality of Pierre's scientific work is that he was asked to become chairman not only of the Belgian Devonian stratigraphic commission, of the Belgian National Geological Council but also to chair the activities of the international Subcommittee of Devonian Stratigraphy (SDS). Being asked for these functions by your fellow scientists is the best appreciation for your achievements. And Pierre has fulfilled these tasks to the great satisfaction of everybody involved in these working parties.

He was involved in the international Subcommittee on Devonian Stratigraphy (SDS) from 1974 to 2005 and was chairman from 1997 to 2005. His management of the SDS smoothly led to the definition of Global Stratotype and section points, the now famous GSSP's, at the base of all the different stages, as required by the International Commission of Stratigraphy (ICS). Compared to other periods in the international geological timetable, an outstanding result. This achievement got so much appreciation that Pierre was a nomination candidate for the presidency of ICS. All of you knowing Pierre's style will not be surprised that he modestly and politely declined the proposal.

His leadership in the department of palaeontology will still be felt after his retirement, while a major international project that D.Cahen (Director of the RBINS) and Pierre initiated on dinosaurs and mammals continues. Pierre's internationally oriented approach of stratigraphy and palaeontology is perfectly illustrated by the project he set up on Cretaceous vertebrate evolution and palaeoecology in East Asia. This led to some spin off projects in other places in the world and involves other stratigraphic time slices. This initiative was courageous and by no means the easiest choice certainly not from a practical administrative, logistics and communication point of view but it brought the vertebrate palaeontologists of the RBINS explicitly on the international scene. Pierre's initiative is logically connected with the responsibility of the RBINS for the world famous Iguanodons of Bernisart, but it has also started a new élan for the RBINS and challenging opportunities for several young researchers at and around the RBINS. They know he has always defended their projects with conviction and success at the right places at the right time. It is beyond doubt that Pierre's innovative research initiative has paved the way for continued high-level research by young researchers in the Palaeontology department in the years following his retirement.

This major international project should not make us forget that Pierre has also taken the initiative for other projects, such as the study of Jurassic marine reptiles from the Belgian Lorraine.

Pierre Bultynck has built a scientific research career not only at the RBINS but he also taught palaeontology since 1973 as an external professor at Leuven University. He has contributed to the formation of geologists during 30 years at the university! He taught the main course in Stratigraphic Palaeontology for geologists and mining engineers and an optional course in micropalaeontology for which he teamed up with Etienne Steurbaut, also from the RBINS. He organized practicals in which he explained the art of palaeontology, field trips where he personally showed, supported by his own particular professional expertise, the classical research area around Givet, Couvin and Philippeville, and he taught students the patience necessary for searching and collecting fossils at outcrops.

He helped the geology department of Leuven University in many ways. Not only did he teach palaeontology, but he was also available for students as a source of stratigraphic information and knowledge whenever they had papers to write. He supervised many master theses, several successful doctoral dissertations and students from abroad also found the way to his laboratory. More than once he assisted in the organization of the yearly international student field trip.

Pierre always assumed the responsibilities of his position. He served on many commissions and committees. At Leuven University he was elected to represent the external professors on the faculty council and he was a member of the program committee of geological studies

in Leuven. He helped the geology department improve the curriculum of the study program over all those years. This was not a quiet period: there was an almost continuous demand to do more with less means, there was the introduction of external and internal audit routines to contend with, there was the change from a yearly to a semester study plan and lately, the preparations for the introduction of the bachelor and master system.

In all these university matters Pierre was the appreciated view from outside, bringing his experience and calm perception in an often complicated situation. For the students he was a soft-spoken, respected teacher-professor. He cared about the students.

Although his research was very specialized, he has always supported the idea that a thesis, even a doctoral thesis, had to have a broad enough scope to allow a student to remain attractive for a potential recruiter. He put the interest of the student first.

Besides his career at the RBINS in Brussels and at the University of Leuven, another aspect of Pierre's career needs to be mentioned. He understood that a scientist who receives facilities and means from public funds has to try to communicate back by explaining to the interested public what he is doing and why this is a worthwhile endeavour and what are the results. To do so successfully the need for communication has to be understood and the art of communication has to be mastered. Not surprisingly in an institute reputed for its museum, Pierre understood both. He authored a popular book on the Iguanodons from Bernissart, published in Dutch and French (and also a shorter English version) in the late 80's and he was

involved in renewing the exhibition of the Iguanodons and several other major exhibitions at the RBINS.

Often Pierre has taken the initiative for earth sciences popularisation. As president of the society of geology graduates from Leuven University, he chaired the initiative of the exhibition "Van Silex tot Chip", resulting undoubtedly in an increased and broad appreciation for academic and professional geologists. He is again chairman of a scientific committee organizing at the end of 2005 an exhibition in Leuven on the evolution of life, displaying eye-catching fossils.

Talking to you about the outstanding achievements of a devoted scientist might lead you to the erroneous conclusion that Pierre is not an enjoyable companion for more than to earth activities. Many associate Pierre with an almost legendary cigarillo; he loves a good drink and appreciates a good meal under all circumstances and preferentially in company of friends, colleagues and collaborators.

It is hoped that Pierre's present good health continues in the future allowing him to remain active in our scientific community, giving advice and help.

Pierre Bultynck's scientific achievements are outstanding, his professorship will be remembered by many students and the public is thankful for his many cultural initiatives.

A sincere thank to Pierre Bultynck for all you gave us!

Noel Vandenberghe & Annie Dhondt

