



VÄINÖ AUER 1895—1981

Professor Väinö Auer, honorary President of the Geological Society of Finland, died on 20th March 1981 at the age of 86. He was born in Helsinki on 7th January 1895 and matriculated in 1914. Only three years later he sat for his Candidate of Philosophy and in 1920 he defended his doctoral thesis »Über die Entstehung der Stränge auf den Torfmooren«. This was the first comprehensive study published in Finland on paludification features in the mires of Ostrobothnia and Lapland.

Väinö Auer's early work on the post-glacial history of Lake Vanajavesi in Southern Finland laid a firm foundation for future limnogeological research in Finland. In a paper published in 1924 he detailed the methods by which the original shoreline of the lake could be defined and was the first to apply pollen analysis, which he used to date the mires immediately surrounding the lake. He also demonstrated the significance of the stratigraphy of these shore mires as a record of the history of the lake. Thus a deterministic

model was developed which provided an approach for future geological work on lakes and their developmental history.

In 1925 Väinö Auer received a scholarship from the International Education Board that enabled him to continue his investigations on the relationship between forests and paludification events in Canada. With the assistance of the Geological Survey of Canada, he obtained an extensive material of peat profiles from Nova Scotia to the Niagara Falls. These were the first results of this kind and paved the way for research into peat stratigraphy in Canada as a whole.

Väinö Auer was, however, best known for his investigations in Tierra del Fuego and Patagonia. He led the Finnish Tierra del Fuego Expedition, which set out on its long journey to South America in 1928 under the auspices of the Geographical Society of Finland. It was followed in 1937 by a new expedition to Patagonia by the Finnish Academy of Sciences and the Finnish Forestry Society, again under the leadership of Väinö Auer and with the aim of continuing the study of tephrochronology. This dating method was applied to the stratigraphical interpretation of many theoretical and practical questions concerning the vegetational history, climatic changes, lake development, paludification features, archaeological finds and the location of glaciers in the region during the Holocene Epoch. Tephra horizons have also been checked with good results by the radiocarbon method.

The scientific results obtained by Väinö Auer attracted the attention of the Argentine government of that time, and in 1946 he was invited to lead Argentine expeditions to Tierra del Fuego and Patagonia. More than once Auer's expert knowledge was put to

good use to boost the country's economy, for example during his tenure of the position of consultant on matters concerned with Tierra del Fuego and Patagonia to the Argentine Ministry of Agriculture in 1946—57 and the Central Bank in 1950—53. In 1950 Väinö Auer received an award from the Argentine Academy of Exact Sciences for his paper »Las capas volcánicas como base de la cronología postglacial de Fuego-Patagonia».

Väinö Auer had a long and fruitful career at the University of Helsinki as professor of Geography in 1929—50, as e.o. professor in 1953—57 and as professor of Geology and Palaeontology from 1957 until his retirement in 1963. A man of vast learning, he was a colourful character and an inspiring teacher. His broad perspectives and liberal opinions combined with his respect for what he perceived as matters of lasting value, imbibed us students with a sense of expansiveness and security.

In recognition of his contribution to our knowledge of the world, Väinö Auer received numerous honours and awards both in Finland and abroad. These included the golden Fennia Medal of the Geographical Society of Finland, the golden Eskola Medal of the Geological Society of Finland, which is the highest honour afforded to a geologist in Finland and a fellowship of the highly esteemed Explorers' Club.

Shortly before his death I had the honour to write to Argentina about Väinö Auer's life work. From many discussions and lectures I summarized his scientific philosophy as follows: »No research findings are final. They are no more than a key to open up still newer and newer visions».

Pentti Alhonen