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REIMER SIMONSEN (10 MARCH 1931-9 JULY 2012)

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Obituary

REIMER SIMONSEN (10 MARCH 1931–9 JULY 2012)



Dr Reimer Simonsen will be remembered chiefly for his association, as the first curator, with the diatom collection of Friedrich Hustedt in Bremerhaven, but also by many colleagues as the host, in 1970, of the very first international diatom meeting and the next four of a biennial series that has continued in a somewhat different form now for over 40 years.

Born on 10 March 1931 in Ladelund, Schleswig-Holstein, Reimer attended school in Husum, matriculating in 1951. His father became director of a school in Plön where Simonsen continued to nurture an interest in aquatic biology that had begun on the west coast. He continued his studies at the Christian Albrechts University, Kiel and published his first paper, on diatoms of small water bodies in Holstein. His 1959 PhD topic concerned the benthic diatoms of the western Baltic Sea and he described a number of new species in two papers. Thereafter, his main focus was marine diatoms, gradually becoming more interested in the centric genera that reached fruition in his 'Ideas for a more natural system of the centric diatoms' published in 1972. Earlier, in

1964–1965, he had taken part in a six-month long cruise of the Indian Ocean on the R/V *Meteor* in the report of which he presented light microscopic morphology and distribution data on 247 taxa, describing the genera *Haslea*, *Pachyneis* and *Cymatonitzschia* as new. One of Simonsen's lasting legacies is the development of the multinet with technical help from the institute, which he designed specifically for the *Meteor* expedition. This was a single device allowing six separate plankton nets to be opened and closed sequentially as it is raised from a starting depth in the water column.

On 1 July 1965, Simonsen was appointed curator of the slide collection and library of Friedrich Hustedt that had been bought by the city of Bremen in 1963. This collection was transferred to the Institut für Meeresforschung in Bremerhaven (later to be incorporated in the Alfred Wegener Institute) following Hustedt's death in 1968 and at this time Simonsen arranged for the purchase of the more than 20 000 pieces of material. Thus, before Hustedt died in 1968, Simonsen was able to begin to deal with the curation of what was one of the largest personal collections

of diatoms in the world whilst in contact with Hustedt himself. For assistance, Simonsen had the help of Gisela Block, Angelika Meyer and since 1977, Friedel Hinz who is still there. Between them they set up the collection of over 20 000 samples and 65 000 microscope slides, all cross-referenced with a card index system. The order of it all was wonderful to behold and, later, when the time came to set up a database for the collection, the foundation had already been laid. The complement of the material and slides was, of course, the huge library. This was supplemented significantly by Reimer's final large project, the illustrations of the type specimens of Hustedt's new taxa which he published in 1987. Two large volumes of illustrations and a catalogue of explanation and text show just how good a microscopist Simonsen was. As a result, he had a special relationship discussing microscopes and lenses with some of the Zeiss service engineers but he had no time for those visitors who showed that they did not understand the basics of the instrument. He was very much of the opinion that the collection formed the basis for the Arbeitsplatz (study centre) to which students were very welcome, but that it did not exist for the curation to do the science for the investigator who was reluctant to travel; help seeking slides and material yes, but the rest was left to the enquirer. There are many who have, and still do visit the collection with their queries and enjoy the very best microscope facilities.

In 1970, Simonsen hosted the first international symposium on 'Recent and Fossil and Marine Diatoms' which he and a number of colleagues had conceived. There were only 15 participants at this meeting but it was clearly a success because 20 people, chiefly from Europe and the USA, attended a meeting in London in 1972 and the occasion has expanded up to 10-fold since. He edited the first five volumes of the proceedings. His last was at Antwerp in 1978 where the focus of the meeting was hotly debated. Here it was decided to include the freshwater taxa in future because it had already become a problem for those whose taxa/queries crossed the borders between fresh and salt. Simonsen was very much against the move and he had a good point because in the ensuing years, and inevitably, the greater numbers of freshwater specialists have rather crowded out the marine branch of the science.

Straightforward to the point of being blunt at times, Reimer Simonsen was not well understood but his direct style was refreshing if not controversial, as this extract from his introduction to the *Meteor* report shows; it does have resonance for today: 'I realize very well that production biology is a very important research field but I cannot get quite rid of the feeling that many planktologists are happy to have finally reduced the entire phytoplankton to anonymous carbon. This may sound overly exaggerated, but it is evidently not very far from the truth. I dare to write freely because hardly any "modern" planktologist will ever read these lines, since he is not interested in the organisms themselves which are dealt with here'.

For six years and seven issues, Simonsen edited the periodical, *Bacillaria* published to a high quality by Cramer to do justice to the large number of electron microscopic images being produced at the time, but it proved to be too expensive for the small number published. Simonsen also published a volume on the types of Heiden in 1992 but there are a number of other important contributions among his 49 publications.

Simonsen took early retirement in 1989 suffering heart problems but then led a relatively active life with Fraucke whom he married in 1963, and who survives him, in his native Holstein. Sadly he was unable to persuade the local authorities to allow him to carry out a study of the diatoms in the Wadden Sea near Husum because he would have been restricted by their schedules and regulations. His own collection of 8000 slides and 2100 samples augments that of Hustedt in Bremerhaven. After retirement he made just two visits to the collection, the last in 2005 when one of Hustedt's grandsons Ernst and granddaughter Elisabeth, visited with some of their family.

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