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Book Review

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Book review

The Bishop Method: The Life and Achievements of Professor Alan W. Bishop, Soil Mechanics Pioneer, 1st edn

Laurie Wesley. Whittles Publishing, Caithness, UK, 2019, ISBN 978-184995-439-6, £35.00, 185 pp.

The late Professor Alan Wilfred Bishop (1926–1988) was an internationally revered academic and engineer who pioneered the analysis of soil slopes and majored in embankment dams during the period 1943–1981. Educated at King's College Schools and Emmanuel College, Cambridge, he first worked for the London Metropolitan Water Board and then for the Building Research Station and then moved into academia at Imperial College in 1946. His main pastime was sailing, including an innovative boat refurbishment.

The definition of a biography in Wikipedia is that '[a] biography, or simply bio, is a detailed description of a person's life. It involves more than just the basic facts like education, work, relationships, and death; it portrays a person's experience of these life events'. The person tasked to chronicle Bishop's life and contributions to engineering was New Zealander Dr Laurie Wesley. Wesley, it appears, was hand-picked by Professor Richard Jardine (Imperial College) to undertake the bio given that very few were close enough to Bishop to understand truly the man generally, and his soil mechanics research and methods specifically.

Before starting the book review, I politely enquired about Bishop's place in the bastions and hierarchy of geotechnical engineers. One qualified, independent opinion informed me that Bishop was, without hesitation, one of the most influential figures of soil mechanics of his generation. He arguably had academic peers and mentors (including Professor Sir Alec Skempton, who invited Bishop to Imperial College), but in the history of his time, Bishop will always be an understudy to Karl von Terzaghi, the 'father of soil mechanics and geotechnical engineering'.

The book benefits from simple composition in three parts. Part 1 covers Bishop's life generally, part 2 inspects his academic work and achievements and part 3 includes contributions from students, friends and family. It is

important to set the context of the two decades from the mid 1940s to the mid 1960s, regarded as the golden years for soil mechanics.

Bishop's most recognised works include the *Bishop Method of Slip Circle Analysis*, in 1966 leading a team of four to investigate and report on the Aberfan disaster in South Wales, UK, and his 1930s investigations into the Chingford Reservoir slip. This investigation was subsequently entitled 'the birth of soil mechanics in Great Britain'.

Bishop took his Quaker pacifist beliefs extremely seriously and was greatly loved by his students. Many students gained entry to Imperial based on wishing to be supervised by him. An interesting observation by Wesley is that Bishop was 'guileless', in that he put the interests of soil mechanics and laboratory experimentation first, a noble pursuit. There are parallels here with Sir Ove Arup, who, on setting up the architectural practice Arup Associates, recorded his loyalty was to architecture, not necessarily architects.

Bishop, it appears, was meticulous in everything, from grammar and spelling to laboratory testing. By the 1970s, Bishop started to lose some confidence and enthusiasm in this beloved profession. However, in this period, and later, we learn so much more, from his marriage to Myrtle Fox to his general health conditions, both physical and mental.

Professor Alan Bishop's profession is fascinating and inspiring. I happily immersed myself in his world, taking time to learn everything I could about the man, his business in soil mechanics and the incredible responsibility that came with investigating civil engineering failures. Returning to Wikipedia's definition of a biography, the author, Wesley, should be applauded for delivering on this definition admirably.

Richard Nicholl