

A Toast to the Queen

While I was a graduate student at Colorado State University a paper I wrote was selected for presentation at the 1972 Cloud Physics Conference in London, England. The conference organizer, Dr. B.J. Mason, head of the British Meteorological Office, selected about fifty papers out of over 200 which had been submitted. Mine was one of them.

The conference was held in the Royal Society of London in Pall Mall near St. James Park. This historic society and chambers had famous members from the past, such as Isaac Newton and Lord Kelvin. Because it was considered an honor to have a paper selected for this conference, my travel and expenses were paid directly by the National Science Foundation.

This conference was the most demanding conference in which I've ever participated because Dr. Mason allowed each author one hour to make his presentation and one hour for questions and answers. There was only one track for all the papers, so all participants attended all sessions. At this conference I learned the difference between the British and the American method of questioning the speaker.

Like the way the British Prime Minister is questioned by the parliament when he appears before them, each speaker at the London Cloud Physics Conference was cross examined for over an hour after his presentation on the purpose, method, and significance of his research. Unless a speaker was obviously incompetent or made a serious mistake in his work, American audiences seldom press a speaker to defend his work with such rigor as the British scientific community. Even then, American scientists will often remain silent and ignore someone whose work they consider inferior. It's considered impolite to question a scientist too deeply in public. However, the British scientific audience will pepper a speaker with questions and comments about every aspect of his work with a ferocity not seen in America.

I gathered from this experience that the give and take in a question and answer session is much like a debate. Dr. Mason took the lead in most cases to ask the first questions. He sat on the front row during the presentation, and after the author was finished, typically stood up and rattled off a list of two or three questions and comments, some of which could take several minutes to express. If he didn't receive what he considered an adequate response, he would follow up with additional comments and questions, some of which could be quite pointed.

To an American audience the questions and comments often seemed highly personal and unnecessarily animated. In addition, the questions were frequently couched in the third person or referred to "the good scientist from Colorado" or some other such formal phrase. One often felt that he was in a tennis match or in the U.S. Senate.

Fortunately, my paper went well, and the questions and answers were relatively easy to deal with. My paper dealt with a case study of fragmented dendritic ice crystals observed in Yellowstone National Park, and the potential for such fragmentation to explain the presence of unusually large concentrations of ice crystals frequently observed in winter snow clouds.

This happened to be a favorite subject for Dr. Mason and, I suspect, the reason my paper being selected for presentation. The questions and answers were energetic but reasonable. The only difficulty I had was in responding to questions dealing with my views on how prevalent the fragmentation process was likely to be in clouds. I was unable to answer his question at the time, because this was to be the subject of my doctoral thesis yet to be completed. He finally relented from his questioning, but I left the podium somehow feeling I had failed to adequately respond to his expectations.

About three years later I was able to answer his questions from continued research on this subject for my doctoral degree. I feel somewhat vindicated today for not being able to answer his questions at that conference at the Royal Society, by recent research on the fragmentation of ice crystals that is now being conducted in England and other countries. Dozens of papers currently being published are referencing my work almost fifty years ago.

On Thursday night of the conference, a formal dinner was held at the Hyde Park Hotel in London. This event was to become one of my favorite experiences during my trip to England. Dr. Mason had recently been knighted by the Queen because of his service as Director of the British Meteorological Office, where significant research in meteorology had been accomplished over the years. He was determined to make this dinner a gala occasion which many “colonists” would remember for years to come. He even arrived at the dinner in a chauffeur-driven limousine.

I was unfamiliar with the extravagant pageantry of the British aristocracy. I had not dined with the "Bluebloods" of the American upper-class, let alone with the British academic and scientific elite, who saw themselves one step below royalty. I felt like the proverbial, "American in Paris," except I was hobnobbing with the nobility in London.

The Hyde Park Hotel is a historic landmark in London where many occasions of State have occurred. It's a large white, wooden structure with grounds in Hyde Park and large ornate rooms. The dining room where the banquet was to be served, held about thirty round tables, each of which seated eight. To one side of the room were ten large floor-to-ceiling, mirrored doors. B. J. Mason and his wife occupied the head table at the front of the room, and several other officials for the conference were seated with their wives. Directly behind Dr. Mason stood a Beefeater, at attention, in a bright red waistcoat and pants; wearing white gloves and a furry, black hat; and holding a silver bugle.

Promptly at 8 o'clock the Beefeater was signaled to announce the beginning of the festivities. He blew a short flurry of notes, immediately silencing the room. Dr. Mason stood to his feet and asked the room to rise, at which time he raised his wine glass and asked the crowd to join him in toasting Queen Elizabeth. “To the Queen!” he boldly proclaimed, followed by, “To the Queen!” from the crowd.

Dr. Mason asked us to all be seated and welcomed us to the occasion, introducing the head table and reading the fare for the evening. We were to be treated to a six-course meal served by one waiter for each table. The entrée was cod from the North Atlantic with soup, salad, specially prepared vegetables,

dessert, and coffee, or tea. Laid out before us were linen, china, and crystal all bearing the seal of the Hyde Park Hotel. To my left were four forks of different sizes, to my right two knives, and three spoons. Above my plate near the center of the table was a knife, which I found out later was to be used for the fish.

On Mason's signal the mirrored doors to one side of the room suddenly opened and thirty waiters emerged with platters over their heads, wearing determined looks. Because of the age of the building and the weight of thirty men striding across the room in cadence, the entire room rose up and down as they strode across the floor. Salads were served rapidly, and the waiters disappeared as suddenly as they had come, into the wall to our right. Between each course, the Beefeater would blow a fanfare and Mason would again toast the Queen.

Following the entrée, the waiter for my table noticed that I had not used the knife above my plate for the fish and began to loudly berate the stupid American for having no table manners. His broken English, spoken in a strong Bulgarian accent, stopped all conversation at my table and drew attention from nearby tables.

After suitably berating me for almost a minute, he turned and marched out of the room, waving his hands wildly. After a moment of embarrassed unbelief that a waiter could be so crude as to criticize a guest in such a way, I began to laugh. The entire table joined me in laughing at the situation and the tension was released. For the final course, the waiter continued his angry rebuke of the ignorant American by slinging dishes across the table at me and slamming silverware on the table.

After the meal a reception was held in an adjoining room where guests were able to mingle and get to know scientists from other countries better. I took the opportunity to talk with Dr. Mason about cloud seeding. As a practitioner and researcher in this field I had come to respect him highly for his classic book, *Cloud Physics*. I also knew that he was a skeptic about attempts to seed clouds and induce precipitation, so I thought I would ask him why he was so skeptical. I didn't count on his vehemence toward the subject, nor the fact that he had made a few too many toasts to the Queen.

Upon introducing myself to him in case he didn't remember me from my earlier presentation at the conference, I shook his hand. He returned my handshake but pulled me to him and stood more closely to me than I was comfortable. Due to his height, he also towered over me by at least six inches and glowered down at me with slightly fuzzy eyes and a very red nose.

When I raised my question about why he objected to the field of cloud seeding, he began reciting a list of reasons why he felt the whole field was full of charlatans and quacks. As he warmed to the subject, his voice began to increase in intensity and volume, such that people within a twenty-foot radius stopped talking, began to nervously glance our way, and slowly move away. I was captive to his diatribe and had no choice but to endure a five-minute lecture on the evils of cloud seeding in front of an international audience of colleagues and onlookers. Realizing this was a no-win situation, I decided to back out from under his overhanging harangue, thank him for his opinion, and move to another part of the room.

Graduate students often get themselves into embarrassing social situations because of their lack of status and lack of experience among their betters, but such an extreme sequence of humiliating events, from insults by a waiter, to a tirade by the leading scientist in the field, all within an hour, is probably unheard of. Not unexpectedly, I spent the remainder of the evening with my mouth shut and my hands in my pockets.

I returned home much more knowledgeable about Britain and the British. Even with all the abuse I experienced, I am a joyful Anglophile yet today.