

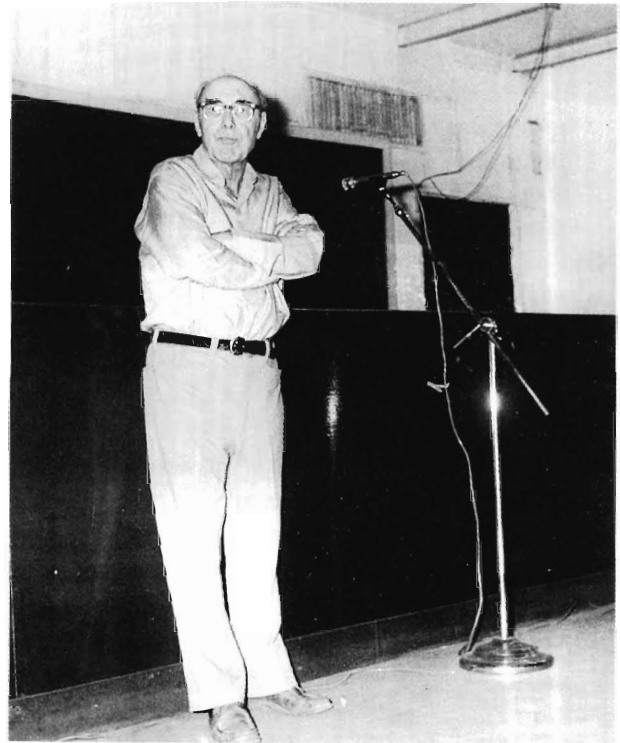


OBITUARY

EDWIN HARRIS COLBERT

Edwin H. Colbert, known among his associates, friends and colleagues as Ned Colbert, passed away on 19th November, 2001. He was on a medical support system during his last week. In that condition he gave almost a complete lecture on his earlier work. He was curator in the Department of Vertebrate Palaeontology at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), New York and Professor at Columbia University. After retirement from AMNH, he took the Emeritus Chair at the Museum of Northern Arizona, Flagstaff from where he continued to publish several important research publications as well as revised editions of his books. Ned Colbert's volume *Evolution of Vertebrates* first published in 1955 (John Wiley) was issued as a paper back edition in India (1971) and his volume *Men and Dinosaurs* (Dutton, 1968) was published in Japanese translation in 1969. An Italian edition of his book *Wandering Lands and Animals* (Hutchinson London) appeared in 1970. A festschrift volume was presented to him on his 75th birthday in 1980 (in which the writer was also a contributor) published by the Museum of Northern Arizona Press. This volume lists Colbert's publications (running into 18 pages) up to that time which includes over a dozen books. Ned Colbert's close association with India on a professional as well as personal level is not so well known. Here an attempt would be made to highlight this aspect.

Ned Colbert's first assignment at AMNH as early as 1931 was the study of fossil mammals from the Siwalik Hills of India. As is well known, Barnum Brown had made an extensive collection of fossil mammals for the AMNH from India in 1921-22 and Burma in 1923. After publishing several smaller papers on this material, Colbert pulled together and expanded them into a large volume : "Siwalik mammals in the American Museum of Natural History" running to over 400 pages with 198 figures and annexed maps published by *Amer. Phil. Soc., Trans.* 1935. This was the most extensive of Colbert's



(1905-2001)

publications. It still remains a classic work which is used as a reference work by all research workers even today.

Prof. M.R. Sahni, founder of the Palaeontological Society of India, personally invited him to contribute an article to a newly launched journal of the society as early as 1957. His article *Relationships of the Triaissic Maleri Fauna* was published in *Jour. Pal. Soc. India*, 1958, Vol. 3, pp. 68-81. The Research workers in India have followed up Colbert's observations in subsequent decades.

Ned Colbert and Mrs. Margaret Colbert were invited to India to participate in the geological field work in 1963 by Indian Statistical Institute (ISI), Calcutta. This was in connection with the work of ISI's Geological Study Unit (GSU). The trip materialised with the arrival of the couple on 10th

Jan. 1964, facilitated by the late Pamela Robinson. Colberts were taken to various fossil localities in Pranhita-Godavari valley as well as Panchets in Damodar valley where active palaeontological work had been going on. Colbert gave a vivid account of his first-hand familiarity with Gondwana fossils in field as well as adventures in the field work in a 20-page chapter *Land of the Gonds* in his volume entitled *A Fossil Hunter's Notebook* (Dutton, 1980), along with remarkable photographs. He also gave its shorter account (with photos) in his book *Wandering Lands and Animals* (Hutchinson, 1973).

Colbert's high personal qualities, apart from being a professional palaeontologist, came to the forefront when the personnel of ISI-GSU accompanied him to the areas of P-G Valley for the field-work. The writer was privileged to accompany him to a quarry site of Lower Jurassic Dinosaurs. We took turns with pick and hammers to explore *in situ* fossil bones for Colbert to see. Colbert (who was around 59-60 at the time) did not waste a minute and took the heavy pick himself and was immensely pleased to look at the fossil bones he himself had uncovered.

Colbert delivered several illuminating lectures during his 1964 visit at ISI, Geological Survey of India (GSI) and at Calcutta University. He was truly impressed by examining a beautiful collection of about a dozen *Lystrosaurus* skulls at GSI and himself arranged them according to size that suggested an impressive growth range. He was at that time also working on a newly found gliding lizard from the American Triassic. I casually mentioned to him that in India we had a living-gliding lizard. He showed keen interest in seeing and acquiring a couple of such lizards. I took him to a Biological Supply House in Calcutta where he was pleased to see the formalin-preserved specimens. Subsequently, he published a paper "Adaptations for gliding in the lizard *Draco*" (1967). He told me later that the Indian specimens led to a better understanding of his newly found American gliding lizard (*Icarosaurus*), published in 1970.

Professor M. R. Sahni, in 1975, was contemplating to bring out a special volume of the *Journal Palentological Society India* to honour J. A.

Orlov, a well-known Russian palaeontologist. He invited Colbert to contribute an article and Colbert graciously obliged. The article: *Mesozoic tetrapods and the northward migration of India* finally appeared in *Jour. Pal. Soc. India*, 1977, Vol. 20, pp. 138-145. Most of us were amazed to note that he took pains to precisely calculate up to last centimeter the actual yearly northward drift of the Indian landmass in his article.

Ned Colbert and (Mrs.) Margaret Colbert's next visit to India was in January 1977, well before the 4th International Gondwana Symposium in Calcutta the same year. His visit was remarkable in several ways. For one, the personnel of ISI-GSU at that time had been labouring for weeks to mount the skeleton of an early sauropod dinosaur *Barapasaurus tagorei* on the occasion of the symposium in Calcutta. As it was the first attempt in India, we were apprehensive of all difficulties and pitfalls. To obtain comments of the foremost authority on dinosaurs, we thought, would be wonderful. We casually mentioned to him about our attempt at mounting the skeleton of *B. tagorei*. He was immensely pleased to learn that and agreed to see the exhibit at the Geology Museum of ISI. He remained silent for sometime after looking at the mount. His silence left all of us in suspense, but he later told us that he was wondering at the giant size of this early sauropod. He had earlier firmly believed that giant size in dinosaurs came much later. Endless discussions and comments that followed thereafter, are most relevant now.

Ned Colbert was the chairman of the session on vertebrate palaeontology at the Gondwana Symposium in Calcutta, held at GSI. He was also invited to present a key paper which was printed in advance and distributed to delegates. The Title: *Gondwana Vertebrates* was later included in a two-volume set of the proceedings of the symposium (pp 134-143). The finding of *Lystrosaurus* in Antarctica by Colbert in 1974 and its bearing on the configuration of Gondwana continents was the topical area of discussion during the symposium. Colbert, however, never missed an opportunity to highlight the vertebrate fossils from the Indian Gondwanas.

Colbert was a prolific writer not only of highly

erudite research papers but also of books much sought after by college students, research workers and academicians all over the world. At the request of the editor of a house magazine of ISI in 1964, he produced an article: *Ancient reptiles of India*. He was approached again in 1974 and he wrote an article for the magazine: *P.C. Mahalanobis and the ancient reptiles of India*, **10** (1-4): 22-25.

By far the most popular volume by Colbert has been *Dinosaurs: Their Discovery and Their World* (E.P. Dutton, 1961). It has been my favourite book. In this volume (p 38), he gives a vivid account of a unique dinner party hosted by Mr. D. W. Hawkins in London on 31st December, 1853 at 4 PM inside the model of a dinosaur *Iguanodon*. The invitation cards were written on the wing of a pterodactyl and the table was set inside the belly of the dinosaur, left open from the left side. Professor Richard Owen was the chief guest, among other distinguished scientists of the day. In *Men and Dinosaurs* (Dutton, 1968), Colbert recalls many interesting stories of the early years of dinosaur hunt in North America. He also mentions about the fact that Owen, who coined the term 'Dinosauria', was a confirmed antievolutionist. He also mentions about the American rivals O.C. Marsh and E.D. Cope who revolutionized dinosaur hunting and study and also carried on one of the most bitter personal feuds known in the history of science. Colbert's long delayed study of a small Triassic dinosaur *Coelophysys* appeared in 1981 (*Bull., Mus. N. Ariz.* 1-61).

For a person of such a high calibre and international fame, the life, it was amazing to note, was meant to be lived in tune with 'Gandhian philosophy of life', far from the trappings of American way of life. Colberts were the gracious and charming hosts. They never allowed me to feel like an outsider whenever I was in their company. He recalled how disappointed he felt when, on my earlier visit in 1981, he could not take me to Grand Canyon due to untimely snowfall. He made it sure that I did not miss it in my subsequent visit in 1985. I kept in touch with him during the nineties and accorded him the honour in our own way by naming a new titanosaur species from India as *Titanosaurs colberti* (Jain and Bandhopadhyay, *JVP*, 1977, **17**(1), 114-136), being the best titanosaur material from anywhere in the world. He wrote a highly emotional letter after seeing the paper.

The demise of Ned Colbert has saddened the scientific community in India. He had a deep and abiding interest in the vertebrate fossils from India. He devoted several decades in practically all parts of the world in search of fossils and made friends wherever he went and named them in his books. He leaves behind a rich legacy of research publications to inspire the next generation of students and research workers. Today, I look back at the several volumes of books (mostly autographed by him) in my collection with nostalgic memories. I consider these as my most precious possession.

SOHAN L. JAIN

(EX-HEAD, GEOLOGICAL STUDY UNIT)
INDIAN STATISTICAL INSTITUTE, KOLKATA -700 100
PRESENT ADDRESS : 2, DURGA COMPLEX,
SECTOR H, ALIGANJ, LUCKNOW 226 024