

Alan Mason & Bill Watters, 1999: The Discovery of the New Zealand Cambrian.
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The Discovery of the New Zealand Cambrian

Last year marked the 50th anniversary of one of the most important paleontological discoveries in New Zealand this century.

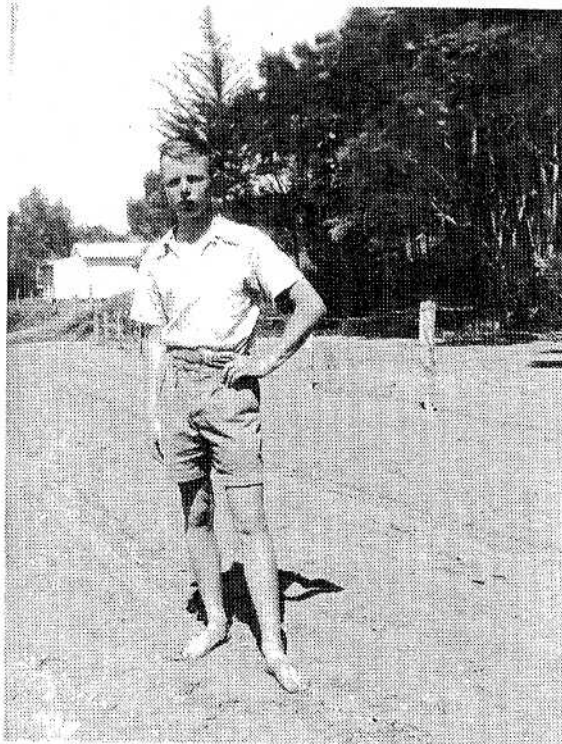
On the afternoon of 14 January 1948 a Nelson schoolboy, Malcolm Simpson, a member of the party on Professor Benson's first visit to Cobb Valley, knocked a fragment off a low limestone mound on the floor of the valley to disclose indistinct fossils. Those were later identified as Late Middle Cambrian trilobites and represented the first discovery of Cambrian fossils in New Zealand. They are also New Zealand's oldest fossils. Further collecting trips to the locality were made in 1949 and 1950, and an account of those is given by Lillie (1988).

One of the present authors began investigating the history of the first (January 1948) trip about ten years ago and published two short notes on the subject (Watters 1988 and 1991). Recently, contact has again been made with Malcolm Simpson and also with Eric Heine, another member of the party. Both have provided valuable information on Professor Benson's visit. This is a shortened version of an account originally published in the GSNZ Historical Studies Newsletter 17: 21-29, 1998.

During the Christmas - New Year break of 1947/48, Professor Benson and his wife were on holiday in Nelson, staying with Sir Theodore Rigg. Rigg was Director of the Cawthron Institute and, like Benson, was a Quaker. Benson expressed a wish to visit the Cobb Valley area from where, with R.A. Keble of Melbourne, he had described graptolites 20 years before (Keble and Benson 1929). Rigg telephoned 'Jerry' Meredith who was in charge of Nelson District for the State Hydro Electricity Department asking him to facilitate Benson's trip (The Cobb River dam was under construction at the time).

Meredith was a friend of Reg Webber, Head of Engineering at Nelson College, and he told Webber of the proposed journey. Webber, in turn, was a friend of Malcolm Simpson's family and, having studied geology under Professor Bartrum in Auckland in the 1920's, he had been encouraging Malcolm's strong interest in the subject. So when he learnt of Benson's field trip he arranged for Malcolm, then in Form 4 at Nelson College, to join the party. Webber himself did not join the group but he was an important member of the second expedition in January 1949 (Lillie, 1988, p.61).

So it was that on the morning of Tuesday 13 January 1948 Meredith picked up Benson and Malcolm Simpson in Nelson city. They travelled via Motueka to Upper Takaka and after a detour to Takaka and Onekaka went on to the Cobb Hydro village at the confluence of the Takaka and Cobb rivers. There they met Stuart Preston, Cobb Station superintendent, and went on with him to the abandoned Hume Pipe Company's asbestos quarry, to meet Henry Chaffey, a local prospector and identity. The remarkable story of Chaffey and his wife Annie is told in Henderson (1981).



Malcolm Simpson in January 1948

That night was spent in the hostel at the Hydro station and next morning, Wednesday 14 January, the three drove up the road to the Cobb Valley - a scenic drive through beech forest on to the ridge overlooking the valley and hydro works, then down the steep descent to the floor of the glacial valley where the construction of the dam and intakes was under way. Here Meredith remained for the afternoon to attend to business relating to the project. After lunch Benson and Simpson, under the guidance of Eric Heine, an engineer at the site, and a colleague, left for the temporary dam further up the valley. (Eric's brother, Arnold, was with the New Zealand Geological Survey from 1958-1962.) At the dam they moved into a dinghy powered with an outboard motor and, steered by Heine, they went to the head of Lake Halley, named after the resident engineer in charge of the construction site.

