

Alun Rhun Hughes

Alun Hughes was born at Anglesey, North Wales, in 1916 and received his senior schooling at Lancing College, Sussex. After commencing studies at the University College of Southampton, he emigrated to South Africa in 1937.

He became a teacher at the Society of the Sacred Mission at Modderpoort in the Orange Free State. In 1938 he registered as a medical student at the University of the Witwatersrand, and a year later he first set foot in the Department of Anatomy. Joining the South African Medical Corps in 1940, he was discharged as medically unfit in 1941.

In 1945 he assisted Dr T D Hall and Dr D Meredith in the botanical research programme at Frankenwald, under Professor John Phillips.

It was in May 1947, when he was 30 years of age, that he became a laboratory assistant in the Anatomy Department under Professor R A Dart. Thereafter he served continuously on a full-time basis in the same department, for nearly twelve years with Professor Dart and 26 years with Professor Tobias, rising ultimately to become Chief Technician. At the end of 1984 he retired from the full-time service of the University, as he had passed his sixty-eighth birthday on 16 July 1984. It is pleasing to report that the Foundation of Research and Development of the CSIR has furnished this university's Palaeo-anthropology Research Group with funds to enable it to retain Alun Hughes's services on a half-day basis.

He is one of the most experienced excavators of consolidated cave deposits in the world. His interest in digging up the past started when he was only 18 years old: at that time he helped excavate burials in the Sussex Downs in England. Soon after his arrival in South Africa, he helped J Eddols collect artefacts and locate rock paintings at Modderpoort in the Orange Free State, as well as at Maseru and Leribe in Lesotho.

In 1948 Professor Dart placed Mr Hughes in charge of field operations at Makapansgat Limeworks in the northern Transvaal. His systematic sorting of the limeworks dumps from 1948 to 1960 was a monumental and demanding labour.

When in 1966 it was decided to recommence excavation at the famous site of Sterkfontein near Krugersdorp, Hughes was placed in charge of field operations. From December 1966 until the present - an unbroken 18 years - he has run the field excavation, for some forty-eight weeks a year, with a field team of eight to ten persons under his direction. This makes the Sterkfontein 'dig', meticulously conducted by him, the most intensive and prolonged ever undertaken.

Among his more spectacular finds at Sterkfontein are the first skull of a member of the genus *Homo*, probably *Homo habilis*, from Member 5 (1976), the first fossil wood from the site (1982), and the first specimen of a probable *Australopithecus robustus* from Sterkfontein (1983).

The controversy and counterclaims aroused by Professor Dart's hypothesis that *Australopithecus* at Makapansgat used tools of bone, horn and tooth led Hughes to study the habits of carnivores especially of hyenas. He excavated their lairs in the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park, at Mala Mala, Uitkomst, Klerksdorp and in East Africa. The results constituted an early contribution to the new science of taphonomy.

Hughes's studies were thorough, painstaking and thoughtful and went far beyond mere technical assistance. His knowledge of, and views on, the australopithecine fossils and sites have come to be widely known and respected. For over thirty-five years he has conducted visiting scientists and parties of students over the cave sites and fossil collections, spreading interest and information on a wide front, and in his own right has become an authority on these sites.

Alun Hughes's contributions to the advancement of anatomical, physical anthropological and palaeo-anthropological sciences have been unique, and have unquestionably redounded to the credit of the University. His single-minded devotion to these researches, to the interests of the University and a number of its departments, his patient, back-breaking, often unrewarding, protracted fieldwork - all these and many more traits mark him as one who deserves the accolade of his university's recognition, by the award of an honorary degree.