WILDERNESS AND HUMOUR IN THE NORTHWEST HIGHLANDS

My parting shots are a postscript to the travelogue on page 364. Although, overall, the little island of Great Britain is one of the world’s most densely populated places, visitors from North America are often surprised by the wild emptiness of northwest Scotland. Vast, craggy, treeless landscapes like the Coigach Mountains, devoid of views even of distant buildings, have all the feel of true wilderness. The Northwest Highlands Geopark covers 2000 square kilometres and has a population of only 2400, 74% of whom live in four villages. But geologically we are in fact looking at North America, a tiny fragment of Laurentia left on the feather-edge of Eurasia when the North Atlantic opened. The unmetamorphosed red Torridonian sandstones forming the Coigach hills have sedimentary ages, with large errors, between 1200 and 950 Ma. They correlate with, and look very similar to, the Igaliko sandstones in the Gardar rift of South Greenland and the Keweenawan sequence in the mid-continent rift of North America, which extends from Lake Erie to Kansas, although the thick alkali basalt sequences are missing in Scotland.

The relationships of the Torridonian rocks to earlier and younger formations are intriguing and much employed in the UK for the instruction of students. They rest unconformably on what the early surveyors, with profound insight, called the ‘fundamental gneiss’, now properly called the Lewisian Gneiss Complex. Around Loch Assynt, the gneiss has a metamorphic age called the ‘double unconformity’. The plane of this second unconformity can be seen dipping from the summit of the hill down to the middle left edge of the picture where it truncates the Torridonian–Lewisian unconformity, a feature always known as the ‘double unconformity’. It’s a marvellous example of in-your-face geology, large-scale features marking enormous missing intervals of geological time, easily perceived at a roadside stop. But switched-on students will ask a simple question: ‘How can it be that the younger Cambrian sequence is tilted but the ancient Torridonian sandstones are horizontal?’ I’m sure Elements readers will have a sound explanation. My personal view is that it shows that Nature has a sense of humour!

Ian Parsons

PARTING SHOTS

WE KNOW MORE ABOUT THE MOVEMENT OF CELESTIAL BODIES THAN ABOUT THE SOIL UNDERFOOT. – LEONARDO DA VINCI

The thin layer of soil covering the earth’s surface represents the difference between survival and extinction for most terrestrial life. – DEFINING AND ASSESSING SOIL QUALITY BY JOHN W. DORAN AND TIMOTHY B. PARKIN

The ‘double unconformity’ on Beinn Garbh (539 m), seen looking south across Loch Assynt.

A fragment of Laurentia. Neoproterozoic Torridonian sandstones of the Coigach Mountains from the summit of Stac Pollaidh. The single-track road is 600 m below.

PARTING QUOTES

2009

October 5–8 Geological Society of America Annual Meeting, Houston, TX, USA. E-mail: meetings@geosociety.org; web page: www.geosociety.org/meetings/index.htm


December 1–5 Materials Research Society Fall Meeting, Boston, MA, USA. Web page: www.mrs.org/s_mrs/Sec.asp?CID=2073&DD=92005

December 1–5 Eighth International Geostatistics Congress - GEOSTATS 2008, Santiago, Chile. E-mail: info@geostats2008.com; Website: www.geostats2008.com

December 15–19 2008 AGU Fall Meeting, San Francisco, CA, USA. E-mail: meetinginfo@agu.org; web page: www.agu.org/meetings

2010

January 18–23 33rd International Conference & Exhibition on Advanced Ceramics & Composites, Daytona Beach, Florida, USA. Web page: www.ceramics.org/meetings/schedule.asp


April 2009 3rd International Maar Conference, Malargue, Argentina. E-mail: corinarios@fibertel.com.ar or haller@cenpat.edu.ar; web page: www.iavcei.org/meetings_m.html


July 5–10 Goldschmidt 2009, Davos, Switzerland. Details forthcoming


August 17–20 Society for Geology Applied to Mineral Deposits 10th Biennial Meeting, Townsville, QLD, Australia. E-mail: SCA2009@icu.edu.au


October 18–21 Geological Society of America Annual Meeting, Portland, Oregon, USA. E-mail: meetings@geosociety.org; web page: www.geosociety.org/meetings/index.htm

October 25–30 Materials Science & Technology 2009 Conference and Exhibition – MS&T ‘09 combined with the American Ceramic Society (ACerS) 111th Annual Meeting, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA. Details forthcoming


The meetings convened by the societies participating in Elements are highlighted in yellow. This meetings calendar was compiled by Andrea Koziol. To get meeting information listed, please contact Andrea at Andrea.Koziol@notes.udayton.edu