

Book review

A particle of clay - the biography of Alec Skempton, Civil Engineer. J. Niechcial. Latheronwheel, Caithness: Whittles Publishing, 2002, 208 pp. ISBN 1 870325 84 2. £35.00

The December 2001 issue of *Geotechnique* (51, No. 10, 829-834) contained the obituary of A. W. Skempton. In the opening paragraph it was stated that 'Professor Sir Alec Westley Skempton died on 9 August 2001, full of years and honours, active to the end. He was a legend in his own time, one of the founding fathers of our discipline of soil mechanics'. It is fitting that such an illustrious career should be the subject of a lively and instructive biography. His older daughter Judith prepared *A particle of clay* during Skempton's lifetime but, although the book was read by him, he did not live to see its publication.

There is much in the book about Skempton's family and friends that illuminates the man and his achievements. We also see him enduring those problems that are the lot of all men as he faces the trauma of house-hunting and confronts a self-service petrol pump for the first time!

The book has considerable technical interest. The failure of the embankment dam at Chingford during construction in

1937 was one of the most important events in the development of soil mechanics in the United Kingdom prior to the Second World War and the account that is given of this event is a little different from that found in Goodman's biography of Terzaghi.

Some attention is given to the tensions that developed between Imperial College and the schools of soil mechanics at Cambridge and Manchester. The description of the contretemps with Rowe over Angus Skinner's 1969 *Geotechnique* technical note on friction in soils (19, No. 1, 150-157) is enlightening on the personalities involved, but less so on the nature of the scientific contention.

The origins of *Geotechnique* are described in some detail including the important role of Williams Deacons Bank. Skempton retired from the advisory panel in 1972, having served on it for 23 years, the last two years as editor. Current members of the advisory panel are appointed for three years only and that can seem a long stint!

For all those interested in the development of soil mechanics from the middle of the twentieth century onwards, the book will be of great value and reading it should be a most enjoyable experience.

J. A. Charles