

## **Prestwich Prize acceptance speech by Bilal Haq (4th December 2019)**

It is indeed an honor for me to accept the Prestwich Prize for 2019 from the Geological Society of France. My relationship with France is indeed an old one dating back to late 1970s when I first accepted the invitation of Professor Charles Pomerol to spend a sabbatical at Paris University. I made many friends that included professors Maurice Renard, Gilles Odin, Yves Lancelot, Edith Vincent, Hugues Feinberg, Jean Mascle and Jean-Paul Cadet. This was followed by an extended visit to SNPA (now Total) in Pau at the invitation of Jean and Charles Aubert, whom I also count among my many dear friends. And to quote the words of Captain Louis Renault in the film Casablanca, that was “the beginning of a beautiful friendship” with the French academia. This was renewed by another sabbatical in 2007, this time at IFREMER in Brest where I made many new friends including Serge Berné, Gilles Lericolais, Marina Rubineau, and Daniel Aslanian. This is also where I first met my good friend Christian Gorini, as well as Cécile Robin and François Guillocheau from Renne. In 2008 Cécile and François took me for a fieldwork in the Early Paleozoic sequences of the Presqu’île de Crozon. In 2010 I was invited by then President of the UPMC, Professor Maurice Renard, on an extended visit to Paris and I was appointed a Professor Associé in 2011. Since then at UPMC, now Sorbonne, I have collaborated with several colleagues and students, researching topics in marine geology and paleoceanography. Sorbonne honored me with a *docteur honoris causa* in 2013. And I have made many new friends here that include François Budin, Bruno Galbrun, Slah Boulila, Phillippe Agard, Silvia Gardin and Dephine Delmares, Jeffrey Poort and many graduate and undergraduate students.

My fascination with France and French culture continues and currently I spend several months every year in France interacting with both the scientists and the students. Our most recent focus was on the Mediterranean’s deep basinal Messinian salt giant. I am privileged to have also developed a great working relationship with the Industry in France. My early sabbatical at SNPA and current collaboration with Total and its researchers, especially with Jean-Loup Rubineau, Jan Baur, Remi Eschard and Rob Groot, have led to sharing of important data and ideas. It continues to be a very productive affiliation and we just published a breakthrough synthesis of the volumetrics of total Messinian salt in the Mediterranean based on extensive industry data that was unavailable to the academia before. This could help resolve many controversies about the Messinian Salinity Crisis and aid in the pre-salt exploration for resources in the Mediterranean. I will say a few words about the work shortly.

Once again, I express my gratitude to Geological Society of France for recognizing my long-lasting and very happy association with France. My many close friendships keep bringing me back.

And now let me commemorate this occasion by reciting a poem that I wrote last year in 2018 in Paris:

### ***Exploration***

**In awe of my fellow explorers  
I journey through my own mind  
And find hidden places unvisited  
Sounds and sensations unknown**

**Mind's landscapes unexplored  
Where now I yearn to amble through  
Discovering obscured vistas for the first time  
Eager as a precocious child**

**Travelling through somatic was enriching  
But this inner exploration keeps  
Bringing me back to where I began  
And I surprise myself**

**With every insight I become more seeking  
With every new find I find more of myself  
Enigmas waiting to be decoded  
With every solution I seem reborn**

**A child in China looks me right in the eye  
And asks: "Mister scientist, in your journeys  
Around the world what have you found?  
Have you discovered God at last?"**

**I am at a loss, such weighty question  
From one so young weighs me down  
Notion of an ultimate find baffles me  
I stare back at her and ponder**

**The most revealing journey I undertook  
Was the one into the inner space  
Inside microscopic world of the unseen  
Where you find Nature's plans and hidden troves**

Where you see the architect in action  
Creating, destroying, recreating and discarding  
With a blueprint to arrive at a near perfection  
But nay, never an outcome that cannot be bettered

Nature cannot help but persist  
In its never-ceasing experimentation  
Toward greater harmony, loftier beauty  
Evolving mere rocks into nobler forms

Now keen to voyage into myself  
My introspection has its own rewards  
To let me see clearly that I am  
A part of Nature's plans, the Grand Scheme

That holds it all together  
Making particles move with precision  
Of a magical clock, allowing variance  
Just enough to keep us an ever-interested lot

Our awareness comes with a price  
For each insight inflates Nature's circle of secrets,  
That renders incomplete our own never-ending quest  
To unmask the mysteries beyond the visible light

Could this be Man's real *raison d'être*?  
A part of Nature, we are part of creator and creation  
And comprehending Nature and hence ourselves  
Should not that be our most scared call?

Perhaps I have answered  
The child's innocent query after all!

*Bilal Haq (2019)*