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Ronald John Johnston, 1941–2020

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Ron Johnston's influence on modern academic geography is the stuff of legend. No one was more prolific, and few matched his influence or combined the mix of scholarly and personal qualities that made Ron such a towering and beloved member of the geography community. Ron made path-breaking contributions in urban and political geography, and he had an enormous influence on how geography's history and theoretical foundations are understood and taught. His work exemplifies dedication to quantitative geography, notwithstanding nuanced engagement with critiques of positivist philosophy. His wide-ranging contributions to geography's institutions were notably consequential, as was his public policy work, which elevated understanding and appreciation of geography outside the academy. Transcending all of these accomplishments were Ron's unpretentious, giving qualities as a human being—qualities that endeared him to many of us who had the good fortune to know him.

Ron spent the majority of his years in England, but his life was geographically wide-ranging and in spirit he was internationalist and always mindful of how world conjunctures shaped local, regional, and national trajectories. He was born in England, during the fraught interregnum between the 1940 Battle of Britain and the Blitz and the 1941 Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union and Japan's attack on Pearl



Ron Johnston ca. 1986, Park Hill Estate, Sheffield.

Harbor. He grew up near the southern England armaments and railway town of Swindon. From Swindon, Ron made his way north to the University of Manchester in 1959, three years after the Suez Crisis had starkly revealed the decline of and limits to British imperial power. In Manchester, he completed both bachelor's (1962) and master's (1964) degrees in geography.

There Ron also met his future life partner and wife, Rita Brennan. Despite looming geopolitical turmoil, the postwar era when Ron came of age also bore optimism and possibility. The introduction to *A World in Crisis?: Geographical Perspectives* (Johnston and Taylor 1986) contrasts the atmosphere of the 1970s and 1980s with the optimism of the 1950s and 1960s, noting how:

It is of course, extremely disconcerting to shift rapidly from a sure world full of optimism to an uncertain one full of pessimism and crisis. But it is also exciting, especially to students of the world. Such a major shift throws up new opportunities and challenges, scientists and scholars are forced to revise their thinking. Inevitably this leads to academic debate and infighting, as society's crisis is reflected in the disciplines that study society. (2)

As a master's student, Ron began drawing on the spatial-quantitative work that was gaining increased traction at the time. He went on to pursue those interests in the geography doctoral program at a

newly established Australian university—Monash—thanks in part to a connection Rita helped him make with Stuart Duncan, a New Zealander at Manchester who left the United Kingdom to assist with launching the Monash geography department.

Ron's post-PhD career began at the University of Canterbury at Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1967. He stayed there for seven years, rising through the ranks while making important early contributions to the spatial analysis and urban geography literatures (e.g., Johnston 1971, 1973). His physical location might have been distant from the main centers of Anglophone geographical scholarship at the time, but Ron cast his net widely, publishing in prominent North American and European journals, taking up visiting positions at the University of Toronto and the London School of Economics, and making lasting contacts through active participation in international meetings. It was no surprise, then, when the University of Sheffield came calling with an offer of a professorship in 1974. That led to Ron's return to the land of his birth.

Eighteen years at Sheffield were followed by a three-year stint as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Essex (1992–1995). Essex was one of the newer universities established in the 1960s. Ron's experience there led him later to reflect on the reasons for the relative absence of geography departments in these institutions (Johnston 2004). Frustration with senior university administrative duties and a desire to return to a regular faculty position led Ron to join the Geography Department at the University of Bristol in 1995, where he spent his remaining years. During this last phase of his career, Ron and Rita established residence in the cathedral close in Salisbury, from which Ron commuted to Bristol by train.

No simple recitation of Ron's accomplishments and honors can do justice to his contributions, influence, and character, but some highlights are suggestive of his impact and stature. Ron authored or coauthored an astounding number of scholarly articles and book chapters (around 1,000), while authoring, coauthoring, or editing dozens of books. His Google Scholar citation numbers are well north of 40,000. He also wrote hundreds of book reviews—a scholarly genre that few scholars sustain throughout their career. He received some of the highest honors bestowed by the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) and the American Association of Geographers (AAG),

including the latter's Lifetime Achievement Award. He was elected to membership in the British Academy and to the presidency of the Institute of British Geographers (IBG). He held a series of honorary degrees and was awarded the Prix Vautrin Lud by the Festival Internationale de Géographie. He was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for "services to scholarship" in 2011.

Ron's service contributions came on top of scholarly pursuits but somehow never seriously distracted him from them. Throughout much of his career, Ron concentrated most of his service energies on editorial work on behalf of journals. He edited the *New Zealand Geographer* early in his career, he coedited both *Progress in Human Geography* and *Environment and Planning A* for twenty-five years (1979–2004), and he served on countless editorial boards. He was much in demand as an external examiner and as an advisor on appointments, grant awards, and degree programs. He conducted reviews of graduate programs and university admission exams and senior high school certificates (A-levels) in England. This practical involvement offered him a participant's-eye view on disciplinary evolution and would influence his writings on the theme (Johnston 2019a, 2019b). He was also a stalwart contributor to all of the learned and professional societies to which he belonged, and he relished the opportunity to contribute to initiatives that reached beyond the academy—serving, for example, as a member of the Advisory Group on Electoral Law Reform of the Law Commission for England and Wales.

Given Ron's extraordinary career, it is no surprise that an outpouring of in memoriam pieces have appeared in scholarly and popular outlets alike (Forrest 2020; D. Gregory 2020; Pattie 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; "Ron Johnston Obituary" 2020; Sidaway, van Meeteren, and Flint 2020; Weichelt 2020; Castree 2021; Pattie, Taylor, and Jones 2021), including the local press in his hometown of Swindon (Robins 2020) and in Salisbury, where he lived in his later years (Griffin 2020). An edited book—*Geography and a Geographer: Essays in Memory of Ron Johnston*—is also in preparation (Harris, Manley, and Mayhew forthcoming). The material already published typically flags Ron's prodigious contributions and influence but does not always offer insights into how his scholarship was shaped by the various places and contexts within which it was embedded, nor does it capture the

connections Ron made among different geographic communities and realms of geographical scholarship. These matters are worthy of further exploration for three reasons. First, Ron himself made signal contributions to the way we think about place and context—most notably in his monographs *On Human Geography* (Johnston 1986) and *A Question of Place* (Johnston 1991); it thus seems appropriate to put those ideas into practice in an assessment of his career. Second, Ron's productivity is so daunting that his bibliography becomes larger than life. Nevertheless, as D. Gregory (2020) recalls, "Writing, for Ron, was thinking—never a simple record of what he had done. So he never stopped writing because he never stopped thinking." A key characteristic of Ron's practice is that he always took criticism seriously and, when agreeing with it, dared to explicitly revise his own position in his next publication. One of Ron's frustrations was that "geographers have chosen to remember some older texts, but although these may be cited they are rarely sighted" (Johnston and Sidaway 2015, 50). Consequently, honoring Ron's geography means following his train of thought through immersion in the evolution of his published record. Third, transcending the impact of any one of Ron's contributions was arguably his effective, far-reaching transgression of geographical and intellectual boundaries, a transgression that is deserving of explicit attention.

A concern with context and connections underlies our discussion of the three foci of academic interest most commonly associated with Ron: urban geography, political geography, and geographic history and thought. No assessment of Ron would be complete, however, without some comment on the human qualities that made him such an admired friend, colleague, teacher, collaborator, mentor, and acquaintance. Our essay thus concludes with an acknowledgment of the thoughtfulness, wit, integrity, generosity, and sincere affability that made Ron the man that he was.

Urban Geography

Ron's undergraduate education in Manchester was situated in the traditional regional geographic paradigm. The quantitative revolution had started, but it had no place in the Manchester undergraduate curriculum. Ron was thus reliant on the library's academic journals to read the latest innovations (Johnston 2019a). While writing his undergraduate

thesis on his hometown of Swindon, Ron discovered the pre-quantitative revolution central place studies by Bracey and Dickinson and decided to do something similar (Gold and Shepherd 1983). After not being admitted to study in Leeds with Dickinson for his master's, Ron stayed in Manchester to study the central place system of rural Yorkshire (Johnston 1964, part published as Johnston 1966) under the supervision of Thomas Walter Freeman (1908–1988; Buttimer 2003), who became a mentor to the young scholar. Although himself a believer in the continued relevance of regional and historical geography, Freeman was keenly aware of the poverty of much regional research and greatly concerned with the urban questions of the day: particularly slum clearance and expanding conurbations (Freeman 1961). Hence, it is unsurprising that he lent Ron his copy of the proceedings of the International Geographical Union (IGU) *Lund Symposium in Urban Geography* (Norborg 1962) that first brought the quantitative revolution to Europe. Aided in his basic statistics by Percy Crowe (Johnston 2018a) and the just published statistics textbook by Stan Gregory (Johnston 2018b), Ron was able to write a master's thesis reflecting aspects of the "new geography" that was starting to land in the United Kingdom in the mid-1960s and would soon establish key nodes there—at Cambridge and Bristol (Johnston et al. 2008).

This habit of "learning by doing" through literature study and statistical experimentation laid the foundation of Ron's geographical practice in the Australian and New Zealand years. During his doctoral research at Monash, he again found himself largely on his own theoretically (Gold and Shepherd 1983). While in New Zealand, a place that already had fostered a generation of quantitative geographers (Leslie King, William Clarke, Reginald Golledge) who had left for the United States (King 2007), he quickly joined a community of "young enthusiasts" (Johnston 1984a).

Geographically isolated from the main currents of the quantitative revolution, Ron had to "read the research frontier" from the journals that arrived months after publication (Johnston 2019a). His publications in this era tended to be replications of U.S. studies using Australian and New Zealand data. He also wrote methodological commentaries correcting some of the improvised mathematics that characterized the early years of quantitative geography (Johnston 1965). Although he himself would later

comment on his work during these years as “floundering” (Johnston 1984a), his written rather than oral engagement with the research frontier provides us a codified and explicit historical record of the debates in those days. In a characteristically confident move, he submitted papers to the same journals he read, leading to early visibility in the *Annals* (e.g., Johnston 1968) and catching the eye of wider Anglophone human geography (Johnston 2020a). Quickly, he also became a skilled computer programmer, mastering cluster and factor analysis (Johnston 2008b).

In 1969, Brian Berry invited Ron to be a correspondent member to the newly established IGU Commission on Quantitative Methods in Geography and to attend the inaugural meeting of that commission prior to the AAG Meeting in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Ron was swept up in the “invasion” of that meeting by the nascent radical geography community and the Detroit Geographical Expedition staged by Bill Bunge (Johnston 2020b), an experience that he would recall as “disturbing to his empiricism” (Johnston 1984a, 46). His encounter with American geography was a moment when he was directly confronted with the rupturing conflict between quantitative and radical geography.

Negotiating the tension between his positivist urban geography and his left-leaning political sensibilities would characterize Ron’s work in the 1970s and his early Sheffield years. Invited to apply for a Chair at the University of Sheffield by Stan Gregory (1926–2016), a pioneer of British quantitative geography (Johnston 2018b), Ron was appointed to the position and found himself in a vibrant British community of quantitative geographers around the IBG’s Quantitative Methods Group (Bennett and Wrigley 1981), where lifelong friendships—for instance, with Peter J. Taylor—were forged and the writing of a quantitative methodological textbook was welcomed (Johnston 1978a). Nevertheless, he also found himself in a Britain immersed in a protracted economic crisis, particularly industrial Sheffield, long a main center of steel manufacture in the United Kingdom. The industry’s slow decline in the 1970s would turn into collapse in the 1980s (Johnston 1999). Ron quickly recognized that his self-taught positivist orthodoxy could not adequately explain underlying processes (Johnston 1976). Harvey’s (1973) *Social Justice and the City*, which describes Harvey’s conversion from liberal to Marxist analysis, made a deep

impression (Johnston 1974), but Johnston found himself unable “to break out of [his] data based approach or to kill [his] fascination with computer program development” (Johnston 1984a, 50).

Initially there was solace in “the relevance debates,” with their advice to direct empirical research efforts to social issues—leading Ron to engage increasingly with questions of inequality and injustice in his urban research (Herbert and Johnston 1976; Coates, Johnston, and Knox 1977; Johnston 1979b). These debates also drew him into political and legal geography, conceptualizing a political-urban geography (Cox and Johnston 1982)—investigating the influence of court decisions on U.S. urban structure (Johnston 1984b) and the role of pork barrel politics (Johnston 1980c). His new textbooks on urban geography (Johnston 1980a, 1982a), which explicitly departed from his earlier attempt to extrapolate solely from spatial patterns (Johnston 1973), took a historical approach to urban systems emphasizing processes. Nevertheless, he increasingly felt that his quantitative specialism had a limited capacity to further contribute to the urban geographical debates of those days. Hence, Ron largely became “an observer and commentator” (Johnston 1984a, 49) on urban geography until the mid-1990s. In that intermediate period he became increasingly critical of positivist urban geography, calling it a “twenty-year diversion” (Johnston 1985c) or a “cul de sac” (Johnston 1993b). He was particularly critical when the nascent geographic information systems community wanted to “go back” to some precepts of the quantitative revolution (Taylor and Johnston 1995).

It was only after becoming embedded again in a community of enthusiastic quantitative geographers in Bristol from 1995 (Johnston 2016) that Ron reevaluated his position (e.g., Johnston 2000; Johnston et al. 2003; Johnston et al. 2014; Johnston et al. 2020) and picked up the gauntlet of quantitative urban geography. He also started collaborating with his antipodean colleagues Mike Poulsen (a former student) and James Forrest on the topic of segregation and migrant neighborhoods. Although some of their studies make reference to Johnston’s foundational publications (Poulsen, Johnston, and Forrest 2000), after several years they developed an independent body of work (Johnston, Poulsen, and Forrest 2007). Similarly, there were various research collaborations with Bristol colleagues on quantitative

empirical topics (Johnston et al. [2020] outline many); for instance, around multilevel modeling (Manley et al. 2015). For Ron, the intellectual stimulation from these consecutive generations of Bristol peers during his twenty-five years of “paid retirement” (Johnston 2016) was something he enjoyed enormously.

Political Geography

Johnston’s political geography work, particularly electoral geography, is the most voluminous segment of his oeuvre and the segment he is most known for outside the geographical discipline. His first venture into electoral geography (Johnston 1972) was a paper that was initially intended as a critique of Cox’s (1969) publication on neighborhood effects in voting (Johnston 1984c; Johnston and Pattie 2012). That paper would eventually draw Ron deeply into the topic, despite having no intention to become an electoral geographer (Johnston 2012). Electoral geography was a fertile pasture for British quantitative geographers in the 1970s, prompting Ron to coauthor with Peter J. Taylor (Taylor and Johnston 1979) a landmark textbook and a path-breaking methodological study with Alan Hay (Johnston and Hay 1982) estimating local voting matrices using Wilson’s entropy-maximizing models. A monograph (Johnston 1985b) on intersections of place and class in England within the 1983 UK General Election applying these methods makes decidedly clear that geographical context matters in explaining changing party fortunes. What followed was a continuous flow of work on subsequent British elections, with incidental studies about other contexts (Pattie and Johnston [2003] and Johnston and Pattie [2006, 2017] provide overviews). The most salient electoral geographic structure attracting his attention was the English North–South divide, which (among other fractions) Ron analyzed in a subsequent monograph (Johnston, Pattie, and Allsopp 1988). Ron’s electoral work also included studies on biases in the British electoral system (Johnston et al. 2001) and work on the influence of money on election outcomes (Johnston and Pattie 2014).

A short tribute focused on this electoral geography work, published in tandem with a review essay by Ron on UK electoral reform in the nineteenth century (Johnston 2021), noted Ron’s “encyclopaedic knowledge of elections and election systems, and his

ability to draw on many academic disciplines: in this case, geography, political science and history. He was a pioneering interdisciplinary scholar” (Fisher and Pattie 2021, 127).

For Johnston, particularly in light of his 1970s and 1980s state of mind, positivism in electoral geography was easier to justify. Ron’s quantitative electoral geography reflected his view that social variability among and between different capitalist states was a product of intrastate political–geographic differences (Johnston 1982b). Marxist political economy offered important insights on processes unfolding at a global scale but could not explain why certain countries had more equitable social systems than others (Johnston 1982b). Ron thus concluded that quantitative electoral geography could play socially useful roles as long as the theoretical link with the wider political geography literature was maintained (Johnston 1980b, 1980c).

In the early 1980s, Ron was a key figure in the establishment of the journal *Political Geography* (then titled *Political Geography Quarterly*). When a contact from the legal scholarship–focused Butterworths Publishers approached him, Ron referred the publisher to Peter J. Taylor, then based at Newcastle University in England, who became the journal’s first coeditor, with John O’Loughlin, then at the University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign. At the same time, Ron was involved in the establishment of the IGU Commission on Political Geography (originally known as the Commission on the World Political Map). Having stated in an article titled “Political Geography without Politics” that “political geographers have concentrated almost exclusively on the international system and the morphology of the nation state, and have ignored the local arenas in which most political activity takes place” (Johnston 1980d, 445), Ron followed up with the book *Geography and the State: An Essay in Political Geography* (Johnston 1982b). Ron also contributed to the applied arena, serving as an independent expert in the redrawing of parliamentary boundaries in England and becoming a Commissioner for the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, which redraws local authority boundaries (Rossiter, Johnston, and Pattie 1999; Johnston, Pattie, and Rossiter 2021). When reforms were contested, Ron’s expertise was frequently called on. He noted how, in the 2010s, the reforms became one of the most debated topics in the UK upper parliament

(the House of Lords): “All three [of the major political] parties trusted my neutrality, so I was involved in almost daily discussions with them to advise how the new rules could be amended to get better equality in the electorates while retaining the situation whereby MPs represented identifiable communities” (The University of Bristol [n.d.](#)).

Geographic History and Thought

Again following in the footsteps of his Manchester mentor Thomas Walter Freeman, Ron began writing about twentieth-century disciplinary history in the late 1970s (e.g., Johnston [1978b](#)), focusing on the postwar period that Freeman’s (1961) work had hardly addressed. A flood of publications followed. Ron’s first key work was a 232-page textbook, *Geography and Geographers: Anglo-American Human Geography since 1945* (Johnston [1979a](#)). The catalyst was Ron’s arrival at Sheffield in 1974, where he was asked to teach an undergraduate class on the post-1945 trajectory of the discipline. In the book, Ron insisted on the importance of contextualizing disciplinary change, and its spatial and temporal frames mirrored those of Ron’s life: the expanded postwar transatlantic circulation of geographical writings and geographers between North American and British universities, with significant outliers in Australia and New Zealand and among some continental European geographers (chiefly in Scandinavia and the Netherlands), who were increasingly publishing in English. This represented a significant reorientation from an earlier emphasis on French and German influences.

Geography and Geographers was also grounded in a nuanced engagement with Kuhn’s notion of paradigm shifts. Proponents of the first of geography’s postwar conceptual upheavals had used Kuhn to justify their calls for a quantitative and theoretical revolution. *Geography and Geographers* concluded that although the paradigm model was attractive “as a plausible, coherent descriptive device” (Johnston [1979a](#), 175), it did not account for the complex picture in which “there are schools of thought which wax and wane, some linked to others, some independent; but there is no consensus, no paradigm-dominance, only a series of mutual accommodations which reflects the liberal democratic societal setting of modern Anglo-American geography” (Johnston [1979a](#), 188).

Geography and Geographers was soon widely adopted for use in classes on the history and philosophy of geography, especially (but not only) in the United Kingdom—acquiring disciplinary influence that Ron would later explore with reference to other textbooks (Johnston [2006](#)). It was cited as an inspiration for a parallel text on physical geography (K. J. Gregory [1985](#)) and a survey of East European and Soviet geography published soon after the end of the Cold War with a foreword by Ron (Johnston [1992](#)). He later attributed the initial success of *Geography and Geographers* to the absence of a direct competitor, for other books on the history and philosophy of the discipline were not designed as primers and human geography’s “paradigm wars” of the 1960s and 1970s created the need for a guide for the perplexed (Johnston, [2007](#)). A historian of the discipline who was a graduate student working on disciplinary history when the book appeared later noted its pivotal role “in recovering and imposing coherence on human geography’s collective memory, and thus its identity, since 1945” (Livingstone [2007](#), 43).

The book went through five solo-authored editions, published in 1979, 1983, 1987, 1991, and 1997, and two more jointly authored with James D. Sidaway in 2004 and 2016. Various editions were translated into Japanese, Mandarin, Malay, Portuguese, and Russian, and a shorter accompanying volume (Johnston [1983a](#)), *Philosophy and Human Geography: An Introduction to Contemporary Approaches*, went through a second edition in 1986. *Geography and Geographers* itself had, according to Boyle et al. ([2017](#)):

Ascended to the status of a classic as a complex set of relationships intensified between the expansion of the higher education sector in the Anglo-American world and subsequent onset of managerial and neoliberal reforms, generational and intergenerational competition for advancement in the academy, historically unprecedented and accelerated rates of turnover of human geographical “isms,” and growing interest in philosophical approaches within human geography. (48)

Ron was at first reluctant to take on a seventh edition. Only a willing publisher and coaxing by his coauthor persuaded him. Even so, Ron felt that the expanded (over 500 pages) seventh edition was unable to chart the dynamism and scope of the evolving and fragmenting discipline. Indeed, in one of his last publications, Ron noted that the original focus had been

on how geographers should study the world, rather than examples of such studies. Moreover:

The “real” history that it tells—of the immediate post-1945 decades—is less relevant now; too long and detailed for an overview of a fairly distant recent past before courses turn to contemporary work. A different book is needed, but is it feasible, especially as a single- or two-author enterprise rather than an edited volume, which will necessarily lack some coherence? Human geography is now so large and broad that mastering its many facets and introducing them to students in an accessible (undoubtedly relatively brief) form is a mammoth task. (Johnston 2020a, 3)

Ron nonetheless continued to work on disciplinary history and sociology until his death, notably publishing on persona in geography who had been central to his development (e.g., Johnston 2018a, 2018b) and for decades editing the biographical memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy.

Mention also must be made of some of Ron’s other key contributions to charting disciplinary changes, especially his coeditorship of five editions (between 1981 and 2009) of *The Dictionary of Human Geography*. When the first edition appeared in 1981 (Johnston et al. 1981), it had little direct competition, quickly became widely used, and was translated into Mandarin and Spanish. Ron also wrote about what he viewed as an uneasy relationship between human and physical geography. He expressed his skepticism about that relationship early on, considering human and physical geography to be largely separate disciplines (Johnston 1983b). He never changed his view, despite exploring the matter in detail in *Environmental Problems: Nature, Economy and State* (Johnston 1989). He also charted the fragmentation of human geography into subdisciplines and methodological silos in a series of papers, books, and edited collections (Johnston 1985a, 1993a). Johnston (1984c) nonetheless presented place as a potential reunifying focus where the philosophical tensions in the discipline could play out—charting the case for place as geography’s unifying concept in his monograph *A Question of Place: Exploring the Practice of Human Geography* (Johnston 1991).

Ron’s Way of Being

Within a few hours of Ron’s untimely death, tributes began circulating over e-mail and appearing on blogs. Part of this outpouring can be explained by

Ron’s professional stature, but many of the comments focused on Ron’s warmth, generosity, character, and humane way of being. Reflections of this sort might have seemed surprising to someone who did not know Ron personally; after all, could someone who was so professionally engaged possibly have much time or inclination for anything else? “Absolutely” is the answer anyone who knew Ron would give.

How did Ron find the energy and time to be so professionally productive while also supporting so many people? Part of the explanation lies in the extraordinarily focused, disciplined approach he took to his work. When not traveling, Ron’s routine was to wake up early; spend several uninterrupted hours devoted solely to reading, research, and writing; and then turn to the other matters of the day (around the time that many of us are just getting going). But Ron’s range of contributions and productivity were also rooted in what Kevin Cox has termed an “omnivorous approach to reading,” along with an extraordinary ability to retain what he read (“an amazing photographic memory” in the words of Larry Bourne). Also at play was Ron’s talent for organizing information and ideas quickly, his facility for fast and effective writing, and his capacity for keeping many balls in the air at the same time. These qualities help explain the stories of Ron writing article drafts in a matter of hours or contributing to joint projects the day after a division of labor had been hammered out. Yet, he was critical of research evaluations, such as the UK’s Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and Research Excellence Framework (REF), that emphasize and seek to measure research excellence in simplistic quantitative ways and inflate academic expectations (Johnston 2008a).

In his scholarly endeavors, Ron was driven not simply by a mission to produce but by a desire to contribute. This was a core attribute of Ron’s personal relations as well. For Ron, the individuals, communities, and institutions that were part of his life were not simply presences; they were people and entities deserving of care, attention, and support. As such, his way of moving through the world was characterized by warmth and a sense of humor, an interest in reaching out to those around him, and a commitment to advancing the initiatives and organizations he deemed to be important. Underlying those qualities was a fundamental lack of pretense and unmistakable genuineness.

To expand briefly on these matters, the one word that crops up most frequently in the tributes penned after Ron's death was *humor*. Ron's "quick wit and sometimes self-deprecating humor" (David Greenland) were fundamental elements of his warm personality. His fellow *Progress in Human Geography* editors still talk about how Ron's presence at the annual post-editorial-meeting "Christmas lunch" helped to make those occasions so memorable.

Many remembrances of Ron also made note of his interest in the activities and work of others—even those outside his areas of expertise. Take the case of Martyn Tranter, Bristol Professor of Polar Biogeochemistry, who remembered Ron's consistent interest in his work: "always encouraging and supportive, but ... [also] his questions about the wider relevance of the work." Ron was never too busy to talk to a colleague or friend or to participate in activities that helped to strengthen the social fabric of the places where he worked. Former AAG President Risa Palm, who overlapped with Ron at Canterbury, commented that despite his incredible productivity, he was never too busy to participate in the daily morning coffee breaks, departmental lunches, or afternoon teas.

Ron was never much concerned with rank or reputation—a clear reflection of his unpretentiousness. The new university at Monash might not have been the most prestigious place to do graduate work in the mid-1960s, but it was an opportunity and a good fit for Ron, so he seized it. Ron was just as happy hanging out with graduate students and fledgling academics as he was with luminaries in the field. He was, in the words of Oxford Professor Danny Dorling, "utterly unfazed ... by pomp and circumstance"—someone who, according to Charles Pattie, "didn't do airs and graces."

Ron was also unfailingly true to himself, his principles, and his ideals. He was not the kind of individual who would say one thing to one person and a different thing to another. If he liked something, you knew it, and if he had reservations about it, you knew that as well. He had many good friends, but that did not stop him from offering critiques of their work if he thought it was warranted—not gratuitous critiques but measured, well-reasoned, nonpersonalized ones. Those who experienced such critiques (including authors of this piece) respected him for it, as it made clear what a genuine, honest scholar he was.

Charles Pattie, one of Ron's closest former students, collaborators, and friends, provided perhaps the best concise summary of Ron Johnston. Pattie's words reflect our feelings as well:

He was just extraordinary. That huge breadth and depth of scholarship. All that irrepressible energy. That extraordinary work ethic. But more than any of that, his deep kindness, humanity and decency. ... It was one of the privileges of my life to know him and to be one of his (many) friends.

Acknowledgment

We are very grateful to the many colleagues who shared their recollections of Ron Johnston.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental Material for this In Memoriam can be found on the publisher's website: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2021.2009721>.

Ron John Johnston's Curriculum Vitae (to April 2013)

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