



MICHAEL WILLIAMS

Michael Williams

1935–2009

A South Wales beginning

MICHAEL WILLIAMS was an historical geographer and environmental historian who received international acclaim for his work on mankind's use and misuse of the world's wetlands, forests and other fragile resources. He was born in Swansea on 24 June 1935, the son of Benjamin Williams, who was a trade representative, and Ethel (née Marshall) who came from Yorkshire.¹ Michael was the youngest of three children, with an older brother and sister. His paternal grandfather had been a coal miner and family members of that generation had been Welsh-speakers. Michael attended secondary schools in Swansea, first Emmanuel Grammar School in suburban Derwen Fawr and then Dynevor Grammar School in the city centre. His mother encouraged him in his academic interests, and a very inspiring teacher at Dynevor kindled his early fascination for Geography.

Having passed his school leaving examinations (advanced levels in English, History, and Geography), Michael entered the University College of Wales, Swansea in 1953 to read Geography, with some ancillary lectures in Economics, English and Political Institutions.² At that time Geography was taught by only two members of staff within the wider frame of

¹ H. Clout, 'Michael Williams, 1935–2009', *Geographical Journal*, 176 (2010), 111–14; R. L. Heathcote, 'Obituary: Michael Williams, 1935–2009', *Geographical Research (Australian Geographical Studies)*, 48 (2010), 215–17; E. Baigent, 'Michael Williams', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 36 (2010), 466–72.

² In 1996 this would be renamed the University of Wales Swansea.

Geology.³ However, that situation was about to change when an independent department was set up in 1954 and a Professor of Geography was appointed, in the person of Dr William G. V. Balchin (1916–2007), a Cambridge graduate, who had taught at King's College London (KCL) since 1945.⁴ Along with Professor Sidney W. Wooldridge, FRS, Balchin had transformed the teaching of geography at KCL from being a subset of geology to become an independent discipline. This was accomplished with the collaboration of geographers at the London School of Economics, just a short walk away. At Swansea, Balchin had to go it alone; however the University College had embarked upon a major programme of expansion and funding for new departments, staff and buildings.

At the beginning of his studies Michael met a fellow student, Eleanore (Loré) Lerch, who became his regular partner at Saturday night 'hops'. With typical gusto, Michael would lead her around the dance floor with such determination and enthusiasm that she had to overcome her natural reluctance. They married in 1955, and Loré's combination of degree subjects (History, German and English) would come to support Michael's later work. After having been taught by a couple of geographers and staff from other departments in his first year, Michael encountered some newly arrived academics during the remainder of his undergraduate programme and the quality of his performance improved rapidly. As he entered his final year, the geography department moved into spacious new facilities, designed by the ambitious new professor, in the Natural Sciences block on the Singleton Park campus.

Among his lecturers was Frank Emery, a young Oxford graduate and fellow Welshman, who had a fascination for historical geography and a particular interest in the cultural landscape of the Gower peninsula. He proved to be a real source of inspiration for Michael, who would write in 1988:

It is clear, looking back over old lecture notes, that the landscape and its makers were paramount in his thinking and interest. W. G. Hoskins' *Making of the English Landscape* [volume], Clifford Darby's 'The changing English landscape',

³The geographers were geomorphologist Gillian Groom and climatologist John Oliver, both of whom had joined the University College in 1948. Prior to their appointment, D. Trevor Williams had taught geography in the department of geology from 1931 to 1946, being followed for two years by B. H. Farmer. From 1927, students could achieve a Certificate in Geography linked to either Geology or Engineering Survey. Geology (with Geography) was housed until 1956 in Singleton Abbey, a Victorian structure and now the central administrative building.

⁴W. G. V. Balchin, *Concern for Geography* (Swansea, 1981), pp. 9–27; A. Coleman, 'Obituary: Professor W. G. V. Balchin', *Geography*, 93 (2008), 62–3.

and E. G. Bowen's *Settlement of the Celtic Saints in Wales* were a triad of inspirational works from which much else flowed . . . His personal kindness in helping in the archive and reading room were other pleasant memories. Nothing seemed to please him more, however, than to take students into the field and explore the landscape of Gower and its surroundings.⁵

Michael delighted in this kind of geography and Frank Emery had an enduring influence on him. However, Emery was only a junior lecturer and he left Swansea in January 1957 when a lectureship became vacant at Oxford. Twenty years later, he would re-enter Michael's life as a colleague in the School of Geography there.

Michael had graduated with a first class BA degree in the summer of 1956 and was encouraged to undertake research for a higher qualification. He held a college postgraduate scholarship and, as was the custom at the time, was employed as a demonstrator in the department just as Balchin had been employed at Cambridge. In this capacity, Michael supported full-time staff in practical classes, map work exercises, field classes, occasional tutorials and other activities. This arrangement was to last for a maximum of three years. After a chance visit earlier in 1956, Michael and Loré had become fascinated by the strange, flat landscape of the Somerset Levels and Michael decided to focus his research on determining how that stretch of former marshland had been drained and converted into rich pastures and productive farmland. In selecting this topic he was following the example of Emery and also that of Balchin who had combined his training in physical and historical geography to trace how the cultural landscape of Cornwall had been fashioned from prehistoric times to the twentieth century.⁶ Balchin's book appeared in 1954 as the second volume in *The Making of the English Landscape* series edited by the historian, Hoskins.⁷ However, it was the lectures delivered by Dr Clifford Darby, FBA (1909–92) at Cambridge in the 1930s that had made Balchin aware of historical geography, demonstrated how the humanised landscape might be interpreted, and introduced him to some of the source materials that might be employed in such an enterprise.

After important work with the Naval Intelligence Division during the war, Darby had been appointed to the John Rankin Chair of Geography at Liverpool and then in 1949 moved to head the Department of Geography

⁵M. Williams, 'Frank Vivian Emery, 1930–1987: an appreciation', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 14 (1988), 451–4.

⁶W. G. V. Balchin, 'Contributions on the geomorphology of south-west England', Ph.D. thesis in Geography (London, 1952).

⁷W. G. V. Balchin, *Cornwall: an Illustrated Essay on the History of the Landscape* (London, 1952).

at University College London (UCL).⁸ Through his writings and personal contact, he would come to exercise a powerful intellectual influence on Michael. Despite the affinity between Michael's research topic and Balchin's recent book, it was John Oliver, who had known Michael throughout his undergraduate career and of whom Michael thought very highly, who supervised the work on the Somerset Levels. The initial spark probably came from Emery's teaching. Further support came right at the end of the project from Stuart H. Cousens, the department's young lecturer in historical geography. Combining archival work with investigations in the field, Michael made good progress on his thesis and completion was in sight when his scholarship and fixed-term demonstratorship came to an end in the summer of 1959. University posts were still few and far between and, like many young researchers at this time, Michael thought that his future might lie with secondary school teaching. To that end, he studied for a diploma in education in 1959–60, being resident at St Catharine's College, Cambridge, where Darby and Balchin had studied as undergraduates.

During that year, Michael completed his doctorate for the University of Wales, for which Darby, by then head of the largest geography department in the United Kingdom, was appointed external examiner. His books on the English Fenlands, which had developed from his doctoral work, made him ideally qualified to determine the quality of Michael's work.⁹ Of course, Darby was more than satisfied with the thesis, which he regarded as not only a fine piece of historical geography but also an exemplar of 'the draining of the marsh' and of 'agricultural improvement', two of his favoured themes in his lecture course on 'The changing English landscape' at UCL. Whilst approving of Michael's use of sources, the flow of his argument, and the quality of his cartography that had been refined under the careful eye of Balchin, he was perplexed by Michael's use of quartiles to determine class intervals on quantitative maps. Michael once told me that he tried to explain the impeccable logic behind this statistical convention but Darby remained unmoved, and insisted that quartiles had no place in historical geography. As the viva drew to a close, he lobbed a bombshell by posing the question: 'Mr. Williams, if you had to cut out a

⁸H. Clout and C. Gosme, 'The Naval Intelligence Handbooks: a monument in geographical writing', *Progress in Human Geography*, 27 (2003), 153–73; H. Clout, 'Henry Clifford Darby, 1909–1992', *Geographers: Biobibliographical Studies*, 24 (2005), 79–97; P. J. Perry, 'H. C. Darby and historical geography: a survey and review', *Geographische Zeitschrift*, 57 (1969), 161–77; H. Clout, *Geography at University College London: a Brief History* (London, 2003).

⁹H. C. Darby, *The Medieval Fenland* (Cambridge, 1940); *The Draining of the Fens* (Cambridge, 1940); 'The role of the Fenland in English history', Ph.D. thesis in Geography (Cambridge, 1931).

chapter from your thesis, which one would it be?' Michael knew that he had prepared himself thoroughly but he had not anticipated this. He remained speechless, and then Darby exclaimed: 'Only joking.' This painful pleasantry brought the ordeal to an end. Michael had his doctorate (the first in Geography to be awarded at Swansea), and he had earned the respect of Darby, a fellow historical geographer from South Wales, but now he was in need of a job.

The Australian interlude

At this time, British higher education had not entered the phase of rapid expansion that would characterise the second half of the 1960s, however there were openings for new academic staff in the Commonwealth and the United States. Michael responded to an advertisement for a lectureship in human geography at the University of Adelaide, South Australia, and was offered the position. For the next seventeen years, this would be home for Michael and Loré, whose daughters Cathy and Tess were born there in 1962 and 1965 respectively. Although small, the geography department at Adelaide was flourishing and friendly, under the benign leadership of Professor Graham Lawton who sought to operate through consensus rather than imposing a clear vision from the chair.¹⁰ The department was a happy place in which to work, with the academic programme being organised and refined with a fair amount of agreement. Differences were resolved through discussion and the department thrived and expanded to accommodate the large 'baby-boom' generation that was passing through higher education. Geography teachers were in demand in Australia and many students went through the bonding system, financed by the education department, in return for an undertaking to teach for at least three years in the state school system, wherever they were required. In the first two years of the undergraduate programme, students had a balanced diet of physical, human and regional courses, which displayed geography as an holistic discipline that sought to understand the differentiation of the earth's surface. Some specialisation was possible in the final undergraduate year, which enabled teaching staff to present their specific interests to the students. Demand was so great that some introductory lectures were repeated in evening classes, aimed mainly at prospective teachers.

¹⁰P. J. Smailes and T. L. C. Griffin, 'Geography at the University of Adelaide, 1960–1991', *South Australian Geographical Journal*, 102 (2004), 62–81.

Michael developed an impressive portfolio of lectures in human, historical and settlement geography, published several papers from his doctoral work, and revised his thesis, which would appear in 1970 as *The Draining of the Somerset Levels*, from the Cambridge University Press, the same publisher that had brought out Darby's Fenland books three decades earlier.¹¹ Darby checked through the revised manuscript and, not surprisingly, no mention of quartiles was to be found. Michael had taken advantage of the University of Adelaide's rather generous arrangement for sabbatical leave to bring his account up to date through further fieldwork in Somerset and other enquiries during 1966.¹² He spent some months at UCL, where the geography department was now headed by Professor W. R. Mead, FBA, since Darby had returned to Cambridge to occupy the established chair there. Michael found the UCL Department,

a stimulating place, intellectually and socially. There was a galaxy of stars, every one a name to be conjured with as a well-known expert in some branch or regional emphasis in geography. The weekly seminars on historical geography, guest speakers and a flow of overseas visitors ... added to the excitement.¹³

In London, Michael delivered a set of lectures on Australasia, in place of R. Leslie Heathcote and R. Gerard Ward who had moved to university posts in Australia and Papua New Guinea respectively. His presentations were well received by the undergraduates, and Mead described him as 'Immensely enthusiastic about his work, fertile in ideas, much enjoyed by students, and completely integrated in our company.'¹⁴ He regretted that funds were not available to offer him a permanent position in London.

Back in Adelaide, Michael's new research was organised in two interwoven strands. The first involved historical research into the impact of European settlers in South Australia and the subsequent shaping of the

¹¹ M. Williams, 'The draining and reclamation of the Somerset Levels, 1770–1833', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 33 (1963), 163–79; 'Drainage activity in the Somerset Levels since 1939', *Geography*, 49 (1964), 387–99.

¹² M. Williams, 'The enclosure and reclamation of waste land in England and Wales in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 51 (1970), 55–69; 'The enclosure and reclamation of the Mendip Hills', *Agricultural History Review*, 19 (1971), 65–81; 'The enclosure of waste land in Somerset, 1700–1900', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 57 (1972), 99–123.

¹³ M. Williams, 'Henry Clifford Darby, 1909–1992', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 87 (1995), 289–306.

¹⁴ Letter from W. R. Mead to the Academic Registrar of the Australian National University, dated 18 Oct. 1971; Archives of the Geography Department, UCL.

cultural landscape, whilst the second focused on the creation and functioning of contemporary rural settlements.¹⁵ Each of these themes gave rise to articles in learned journals, and they were complemented by a couple of papers on suburban processes around Adelaide and the impact of the city upon its hinterland.¹⁶ In 1969, Michael had edited a short book on the occasion of the forty-first meeting of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science at Adelaide.¹⁷ This was described by Les Heathcote as a ‘masterly combination of aerial photography keyed to cadastral plans with an associated analytical commentary’.¹⁸ For the fiftieth ANZAAS Jubilee Congress in Adelaide in 1980, the same theme would be chosen but the state would be depicted from space rather than from aircraft. In 1975, Michael joined J. M. Powell, FBA—another British expatriate historical geographer—in editing a volume that brought together seven thematic essays on the economic impact of European settlers on rather small sections of the vast territorial extent of Australia.¹⁹ Not surprisingly, Michael’s contribution focused on rural settlements and offered an interpretation of the ultimate aim of colonial

¹⁵ A pioneering study in this area was: D. W. Meinig, *On the Margins of the Good Earth: the South Australian Wheat Frontier, 1869–1884* (Chicago, IL, 1962). This book and Don Meinig’s many books on the historical geography of North America would have an important influence on Michael.

¹⁶ For example, M. Williams, ‘The historical geography of an artificial drainage system: the Lower South East of South Australia’, *Australian Geographical Studies*, 2 (1964), 87–102; ‘Gawler: the changing geography of a South Australian country town’, *Australian Geographer*, 9 (1964), 195–206; ‘A note on the influence of Adelaide on rural shopping habits’, *Australian Geographer*, 9 (1965), 312–15; ‘Delimiting the spread of settlements: an examination of evidence in South Australia’, *Economic Geography*, 42 (1966), 336–55; ‘The parkland towns of Australia and New Zealand’, *Geographical Review*, 56 (1966), 67–89; *Adelaide* (Melbourne, 1966); ‘Two studies in the historical geography of South Australia’, in G. H. Dury and M. Logan (eds.), *Studies in Australian Geography* (Melbourne, 1968), pp. 71–98; ‘The spread of settlement in South Australia’, in F. Gale and G. H. Lawton (eds.), *Settlement and Encounter: Geographical Studies presented to Sir Grenfell Price* (Melbourne, 1969), 1–50; ‘Town farming in the Mallee Lands of South Australia and Victoria’, *Australian Geographical Studies*, 8 (1970), 173–91; ‘Periods, places and themes, a review and prospect for Australian historical geography’, *Australian Geographer*, 4 (1971), 403–16; ‘Simplicity and stability in rural areas: the example of the Pinnaroo district of South Australia’, *Geografiska Annaler*, 54B (1972), 117–35; ‘Planned and unplanned changes in the marginal lands of South Australia’, *Australian Geographer*, 13 (1976), 271–81; ‘Settlements in rural areas: planned landscapes and unplanned changes in South Australia’, *Landscape Planning*, 4 (1977), 29–51; and later, ‘The clearing of the woods’, in R. L. Heathcote (ed.), *The Australian Experience: Essays in Australian Land Settlement and Resource Management* (Melbourne, 1988), pp. 115–26.

¹⁷ M. Williams (ed.), *South Australia from the Air* (Adelaide, 1969).

¹⁸ Heathcote, ‘Obituary: Michael Williams’.

¹⁹ J. M. Powell and M. Williams (eds.), *Australian Space, Australian Time* (Melbourne, 1975).

policies between 1788 and 1914, namely to create more and smaller settler landholdings, which largely failed.²⁰

However, a much larger project on South Australia was in progress, which would appear in a new historical geography series launched by Academic Press.²¹ Drawing on a decade and half of research, this 542-page monograph adopted the 'vertical theme' approach advocated by Darby, who favoured archives and libraries, and by Hoskins, who enjoyed work in the field, to explaining how and why particular sections of the earth's surface have their distinctive appearance. The title was a precise reflection of Hoskins's best seller, *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955). Michael began by describing the view from his office on the ninth floor of the Napier Building of the university, looking first at the city and its suburbs, then the surrounding farmlands, and finally at the country towns on the far horizon. Chapters on clearing woodland and on draining swamps echoed Darby's favourite themes, but discussions of nineteenth-century surveys, of irrigation schemes, and building the agricultural townships were emphatically new world messages. The book appeared to critical acclaim, although one reviewer stressed that it focused only on the 'settled area' of the state, namely those districts that were surveyed for agricultural settlement, and did not consider the arid pastoral country that made up most of South Australia. It was followed by a shorter, revised version in 1979.²² In that year, Michael received the John Lewis Gold Medal from the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia for his contribution to historical geography.

In addition to teaching and undertaking research, Michael had served as Secretary of the Institute of Australian Geographers from 1969 to 1972, and then spent a sabbatical year (1973–4) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where new research challenges would start to unfold. Despite having been promoted to Reader in 1972, upon his return to Adelaide he found the department to be rather less congenial than it had been in the 1960s. Interdepartmental competition for resources had become intense, and the introduction of anthropology in 1974 captured some of the student demand that had previously looked toward geography.²³ In addition, there was local competition for undergraduates from the geography

²⁰M. Williams, 'More and smaller is better: Australian rural settlement, 1788–1914', in Powell and Williams (eds.), *Australian Space*, pp. 61–103.

²¹M. Williams, *The Making of the South Australian Landscape* (London, 1976).

²²M. Williams, *The Changing Rural Landscape of South Australia* (London, 1977, repr. in Adelaide by the South Australian State Government Printer in 1991).

²³Smailes and Griffin, 'Geography at the University of Adelaide'.

department of the new Flinders University at suburban Bedford Park. In 1977, Graham Lawton was on the point of retiring, there was no obvious successor, and the University of Adelaide found itself in financial straits. A general 'freeze' on appointments was imposed, which affected the chair and a vacant lectureship in geography. The period of consensus was over, morale was low, and the student intake for geography plummeted in 1978. Without doubt, prospects at the University of Adelaide looked unappealing. In addition, Michael and Loré had to decide whether their daughters' higher education would be in Australia or elsewhere. On both of these grounds, returning to England seemed to be the wise choice, especially since Frank Emery had let Michael know that there was a vacant lectureship in the School of Geography at Oxford. Michael found it difficult to make the decision to apply and delayed again when he was offered the post. However, having made the decision, he never regretted it.

The Oxford years

In 1978, the Williams family left Adelaide, Michael having accepted a University Lectureship in geography at the University of Oxford, made vacant by the retirement of A. F. ('Freddie') Martin. His new academic base was at Oriel College where he became director of studies in geography, Sir Walter Raleigh Fellow (1993–2002), and Vice-Provost (2000–2). Concurrently, he was director of studies in geography at St Anne's College (1978–1997). In 1990 Michael acquired a University Readership which was followed six years later by the personal title of Professor of Geography. In 2002, he became professor emeritus. Michael brought a wide range of teaching experience and made various contributions on aspects of human geography in the first year of undergraduate study. Along with Frank Emery, his former lecturer from Swansea days, and Jack Langton he gave lectures and seminars in the historical geography of England, *c.*1650–*c.*1800 Honour Special Subject.²⁴ Spanning two years of study, this involved one year of empirical material and a subsequent year of methodology, theory and fieldwork. Michael's methodological seminars focused on the ideas

²⁴Emery wrote *Wales* (1969) in Longman's *World Landscapes* series and *Oxfordshire* (1974) in *The Making of the English Landscape* series for Hodder and Stoughton. The latter reflected his teaching and field classes around the University of Oxford. His other books related to the military history of South Africa, and his articles covered agricultural history and rural settlement in parts of England and Wales. He died in 1987, aged 57. See: J. Langton, 'Frank Vivien Emery, 1930–1987', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, ns 13 (1988), 240–4.

and writings of H. C. Darby and Carl Sauer, among other distinguished historical geographers and historians. As part of this special subject, Michael and Jack Langton led a very successful field week in Somerset each year, which embraced half of the time in the County Record Office to introduce students to archival evidence, and the remaining days in the field to interpret the county's varied landscapes. Not surprisingly, the Somerset Levels figured prominently in proceedings and Michael explained to the students how he had first encountered such a distinctive environment.

After a number of years, Michael turned his attention to rural geography, a new special subject in the Honour School, which complemented an option in urban geography taught by Colin Clarke, Ceri Peach and Ian Scargill. The rural course similarly spanned two years of study, with the first paper focusing on rural geography and countryside planning in the United Kingdom, and the second tracing comparable issues in the new world, with case studies from Australia and North America being analysed alongside examples from southern Africa, the latter being taught by Tony Lemon. However, the rural geography special subject disappeared in a revision of the honours syllabus some years before he took retirement in 2002. As the years passed, Michael's attention was drawn increasingly to his personal research projects and to his teaching of human geography at Oriel and St Anne's, with physical geography being covered by Nick Middleton. Countless tutees remember with genuine affection his scholarly support and wise advice, and recall his professionalism on fieldtrips in England and occasionally overseas. However, Michael was a library man rather than a fieldworker at heart.

He was devoted to his academic discipline and to his home college but he was wary of taking on major administrative roles that would sap his energies and deflect his attention from his research. He always took very seriously his tasks in the School of Geography, being a good lecturer and conscientious examiner, and an efficient chair of the Final Honours School as the exigencies of this rotating post required from time to time. He was never chair of the Sub-Faculty of Geography, Chair of the Anthropology and Geography Faculty Board, or Head of the School of Geography. He did, however, serve as Director of the M.Sc. course in Environmental Change and Management at the Environmental Change Unit, which began in October 1994 with fifteen students. Michael retained that position for the next four years.

Michael was proud of Oriel College and greatly enjoyed inviting colleagues old and new to dine with him there. He was particularly involved with projects to conserve its venerable buildings, whilst also finding ways

to enable certain rooms to be modernised and be used more effectively. In the debate over admitting women students to Oriel, he—as father of two daughters—was in favour of change. Just as he never sought administrative roles in the School of Geography, he let it be known that others would serve Oriel College with greater distinction than he could muster. The Vice-Provostship came to him through seniority rather than choice, and in that role he was as approachable and considerate as ever as he oversaw the appointment of a new Provost. In all his collegiate and university dealings, Michael was a calm, courteous presence, whose company was enjoyable, relaxed and often entertaining. He was fully aware of the importance in ‘a collegiate system [of] experience and tact . . . to steer one through the sometimes labyrinthine complexities of committees and college–university relations’.²⁵ He was, indeed, reasonable in meetings and proceeded to do what had to be done, knowing that his personal research provided greater stimulation and satisfaction than administrative routine.

Over and above his teaching and research, Michael served the wider scholarly community in many ways. He was on the first editorial board of the *Journal of Historical Geography* from 1975 to 1977, and later assumed the arduous responsibility of editing the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (1983–8). His unquestionable talents and sense of judgement were sought by other journals and he agreed to serve as co-editor of *Progress in Human Geography* (1991–2001) and of *Global Environmental Change* (1993–7). He also belonged to the editorial boards of *Environmental History (USA)* and *Environmental History (UK)* and remained on the editorial advisory board of *Progress in Human Geography* after 2001. Countless authors around the world benefited from his advice and enthusiasm for their work. He was blessed with a genuine knack of finding ways to strengthen an argument and of finding words to make a point more conclusively. His letters were always enthusiastic, even when major revisions were required before resubmission, and his rejection notes were expressed with measured tact.

On behalf of the Institute of British Geographers, he edited an important collection of essays on wetlands, which was global in scale and interdisciplinary in perspective, containing chapters by physical scientists and economic geographers as well as practitioners of historical geography.²⁶ Perhaps not surprisingly, three of the eleven essays were his own work.

²⁵ M. Williams, ‘Frank Vivien Emery’, p. 454. These words, written about Emery, would be equally fitting in his own experience at Oriel and in the University of Oxford.

²⁶ M. Williams (ed.), *Wetlands: a Threatened Landscape* (Oxford, 1990); M. Williams, ‘The human use of wetlands’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 15 (1991), 1–22.

Reflecting on his own wetland research in the late 1950s, in which marshes were seen in ‘negative’ terms and ready for ‘improvement’ through drainage, he noted that if ‘*The Draining of the Somerset Levels* were to be written today it would include another chapter on wetland values and their conservation’, and would also evaluate schemes for purposeful reflooding of fragile and cherished peat moors.²⁷ In 1993 another text appeared under his editorship, this time in the eleven-volume *Oxford Illustrated Encyclopaedia of World Geography* coordinated by Peter Haggett, FBA. This lavishly illustrated book presented major environmental issues, such as dwindling global resources, pollution, waste disposal, habitat and species destruction, and climate change to a wide audience, and raised the challenge of devising management strategies to attempt to halt, minimise and rectify the worst excesses of environmental degradation.²⁸

Michael chaired the Historical Geography Research Group of the Institute of British Geographers from 1983 to 1986, and hosted an enjoyable international conference of historical geographers at Oriol College in 1983 that was both productive and convivial. A reception for participants at his family home is still recalled with appreciation and affection. He regularly attended similar specialist conferences held at universities across the Commonwealth, the USA and beyond.²⁹ With a growing international reputation and a stream of academic books and articles to his credit, Michael was elected to the fellowship of the British Academy in 1989, being only the sixth geographer to be so honoured, two decades after the election of H. C. Darby in 1968. He served as a member of Council (1993–6) and was a friendly and efficient chairman of the geography and social anthropology section (1994–7). Geographers in the Academy were delighted when he agreed to join Ron Johnston, FBA, to edit a volume to mark the Academy’s centennial in 2003.³⁰ His own contribution was devoted to the creation of the cultural landscape in which he reviewed a wide swathe of research in historical geography, to conclude: ‘It seems inescapable that landscapes are inseparable from human beings, who are their creators, workers, representers, and interpreters through time. When all is said and done, landscapes are an almost totally human construct.’³¹

²⁷ Williams, *Wetlands*, p. viii.

²⁸ M. Williams (ed.), *Planet Management* (Oxford, 1993).

²⁹ See, for example: M. Williams, ‘On and beyond the fringe: CUKANZAS’, Los Angeles, 1979, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 6 (1980), 65–8; ‘The earth as transformed by human action: a symposium at Clark University, 1987’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 14 (1988), 410–12.

³⁰ R. Johnston and M. Williams (eds.), *A Century of British Geography* (Oxford, 2003).

³¹ M. Williams, ‘The creation of the humanized landscape’, in Johnston and Williams (eds.), *A Century of British Geography*, pp. 167–212, p. 199.

He acknowledged that landscape study was less popular among Britain's human geographers in 2000 than earlier in the second half of the twentieth century, but it was his belief that 'landscapes will remain central to the British geographical enterprise if for no other reason than issues of environmental protection, heritage designation and preservation, regional planning and suburban "spill", the ownership of the countryside and public access to it, and national identity will loom larger in the future, not less'.³²

From America to the World

In 1973–4, Michael had spent a sabbatical year as visiting professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Work on *The Making of the South Australian Landscape* was progressing well and he was ready to embark on a new research topic. A conversation with Andrew Hill Clark, a distinguished professor of historical geography, encouraged him to develop his idea of tracing how forest clearance had operated not simply across a selected region but on the continental scale of North America. At that time, the theme was relatively novel and did not generate the degree of scholarly interest that would accumulate later. Clark advised him to study America's forests in an holistic way, with reference to regional and continental ecosystems and patterns of economic activity, rather than in the discrete, sectoral way that Darby had considered 'the clearing of the woods' without reference to other components in the landscapes of England, what else was changing in that complex array, and why those interwoven changes were taking place where they did and when they did.³³ Over the next decade and a half, Michael visited archives and libraries in Washington DC and elsewhere in the United States—occasionally benefiting from support from the British Academy—in order to complement the rich resources available in Oxford, London and elsewhere in the United Kingdom. He insisted that, other than the creation of cities, the greatest single factor in the evolution of the North American landscape was the clearing of forests that had once covered nearly half of the continental surface. In his exhaustive search of library holdings, he found that information before about 1840 was tantalisingly slight, and hence he had to rely on literary and topographic descriptions for whichever areas they

³² Williams, 'The creation of the humanized landscape', p. 201.

³³ Further academic stimulation at Madison came from historian Susan Flader. See: S. Flader (ed.), *The Great Lakes Forest: an Environmental and Social History* (Minneapolis, 1983).

could be found. After that time, statistical and cartographic information increased rapidly so that the situation after 1880 had to be presented in a different way, by shifting from the individual and the local to the aggregate and the regional or even continental scale.

Americans and their Forests: an Historical Geography appeared in 1989 and was recognised as a masterpiece.³⁴ As the subtitle showed, Michael approached the topic as an historical geographer but he was well aware that he was fast approaching environmental history and perhaps even environmental science. He began by exploring the place of forests in American culture, tracing the significance of pioneer woodsmen, lumberjacks and settlers in the vast world of woodland and wilderness. Native tribes used fire to transform expanses of woodland for their subsistence economy, whilst early European settlers exploited forest products and began the protracted process of felling trees for harvesting timber and for creating farmlands that would span three hundred years.³⁵ Using woodcuts, photographs and over a hundred maps and diagrams, Michael revealed how North America's woodlands were at the heart of countless activities, ranging from naval stores and construction timber, to wood for charcoal and for making the sleepers on which iron rails would be nailed to make possible rapid communication across the continent. He showed that, toward the end of the nineteenth century, Americans came to realise that their forests were not a boundless resource and started to conserve the extensive portions that still remained. Michael's concluding message was one of cautious optimism, as he traced how regrowth of woodlands was advancing after 1950 in some regions. Whilst raising questions about the treatment of specific forest regions and the relative lack of attention given to Canada, reviewers hailed *Americans and their Forests* as a major synthesis that would inspire future generations of researchers, and praised its author for his courage in tackling so vast a topic. In 1990, Michael was awarded the Weyerhaeuser Prize of the American Forest and Conservation Society for his contribution to silvicultural knowledge. The book generated such interest that a revised and slightly abridged version was issued in 2002.³⁶

³⁴M. Williams, *Americans and their Forests: an Historical Geography* (Cambridge, 1989); 'The clearing of the forests', in M. Conzen (ed.), *The Making of the American Landscape* (Boston, 1990), pp. 146–68.

³⁵See also: M. Williams, 'Clearing the United States forests: pivotal years, 1810–1860', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 8 (1982), 12–28.

³⁶M. Williams, *Americans and their Forests* (abridged edn.) (Cambridge, 2002).

Fortified by this reaction, Michael broadened his gaze and his reading to the challenge of charting deforestation on the global scale. The idea arose from a conversation with a publisher at the University of Chicago Press, during which Michael protested that such a project was ‘simply too big for one person, encompassing as it would the whole earth through all time. Later she returned to the idea and suggested that I might know more about it than many. I agreed to try, having become convinced in the meantime that while it was probably a topic too big to be mastered, it was one that was too compelling to be ignored.’³⁷ In 2003, *Deforesting the Earth: from Prehistory to Global Crisis* appeared, running to 725 pages, embracing 200 illustrations, maps and tables, and drawing on a bibliography of 1,600 almost entirely English-language items. It is interesting to note that Michael gave the first word to H. C. Darby as he quoted a letter dated July 1954 that preceded the famous Wenner-Gren symposium at Princeton in 1955 devoted to ‘Man’s Role in Changing the Face of the Earth’, where Darby met Carl Sauer, ‘who impressed him greatly’.³⁸ The letter proclaimed: ‘Probably the most important single factor that has changed the European landscape (and many other landscapes also) is the clearing of the woodland.’³⁹ In fifteen chapters, arranged in three parts, Michael surveyed ten thousand years to trace the effects of human-induced thinning, changing and clearing of forests on economies, societies and landscapes across the globe.

Beginning with ‘Clearing in the deep past’, he demonstrated that deforestation is not a recent phenomenon, as is popularly believed, but is as old as human occupation of the earth.⁴⁰ Five chapters examined the varying state of forests from the retreat of the glaciers through to medieval times, when woodlands were thinned or felled at times of population growth, and allowed to expand when population numbers declined in the wake of fire, plague, famine or the sword. In ‘Reaching out: Europe and the wider world’, Michael charted the internal and external expansion of European civilisation between 1500 and 1900, when deforestation accelerated in all regions undergoing demographic and economic growth, which was reflected through industrialisation, mechanisation, urbanisation,

³⁷ M. Williams, *Deforesting the Earth: from Prehistory to Global Crisis* (Chicago, IL, 2003), p. 479.

³⁸ W. L. Thomas (ed.), *Man’s Role in Changing the Face of the Earth* (Chicago, IL, 1956); M. Williams, ‘Henry Clifford Darby’, p. 297.

³⁹ Cited in Williams, *Deforesting the Earth*, p. xv.

⁴⁰ See also: M. Williams, ‘Deforestation: past and present’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 13 (1989), 176–208; ‘Dark ages and dark areas: global deforestation in the deep past’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 26 (2000), 28–46.

colonisation, navigation and trade.⁴¹ Finally, in 'The global forest', he examined a veritable flood of documentation about contemporary environmental and forestry issues, ranging from scares about timber famine, through attempts at replanting and wise management of woodland resources, to recent onslaughts on tropical forests in Amazonia and Indonesia.⁴² He concluded by reiterating his basic aims of helping readers to make sense of the momentous changes that have taken place, and of inviting reflection rather than offering prescriptions for action to resolve the grand ecological challenges posed by deforestation in our own time.

Once again, reviewers praised Michael's breadth of scholarship, his effective marshalling of evidence, and literary craftsmanship. They appreciated his forays into literature relating to developing parts of the world and the very recent past, whilst noting that he was most comfortable with the abundance of information relating to Europe and North America in the more distant past rather than in the last half century. Assimilating the flood of documentation on recent changes was acknowledged to be a superhuman and hence impossible task. Some critics remarked that *Deforesting the Earth* was old-fashioned historical geography, whose author was entranced by his sources and failed to develop—or even to declare—his theoretical position. Others said that sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America merited more attention, that attempts at statistical definition for various periods were inconsistent, and that the book's richly nuanced narrative made for exhausting reading. However, none disagreed with those who declared that Michael had produced a 'magnum opus', a 'tour de force', and a 'monumental achievement'. One reviewer simply stated: 'Williams has given us a book for the ages, and it is something to stand back [from] and admire.'⁴³ *Deforesting the Earth* earned Michael the Weyerhaeuser Prize (2004) once again, and the Meridian Prize of the Association of American Geographers (2004) for 'the most scholarly work in geography' to appear during the preceding year. It was also runner-up in the 2004 British Academy Book Prize Competition. When the University of Chicago Press offered the opportunity of publishing an abbreviated edition in 2006, Michael slightly condensed his text, sacrificed many tables and figures, replaced the long bibliography with a bibliographical essay, and modified the discussion of prehistoric clearing and several other

⁴¹ M. Williams, 'Ecology, imperialism and deforestation', in T. Griffiths and L. Robin (eds.), *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies* (Seattle, 1998), pp. 169–84.

⁴² See also: M. Williams, 'The end of modern history?', *Geographical Review*, 88 (1998), 275–300.

⁴³ G. Wynn, 'Review: *Deforesting the Earth*', *Canadian Geographer*, 47 (2003), 515.

themes to encapsulate results from new research.⁴⁴ A lengthy review article of these most recent findings was his last pronouncement on the topic.⁴⁵

An endless interest in people

Despite his lifelong concern with landscapes and countless years devoted to silent reading in archives and libraries, in 2004 Michael confided to Les Heathcote, a fellow historical geographer, that he found ‘people endlessly interesting’.⁴⁶ Two of his later projects demonstrate that very human concern. The first came in his commitment to putting into print the previously unpublished methodological essays of Sir Clifford Darby. Following Darby’s death in 1992, Lady (Eva) Darby approached Professor Terry Coppock, FBA, to determine whether the sixteen essays dealing with Great Britain, France and the United States, and drafted in the late 1950s and 1960s, might be made ready for publication alongside a handful of contextual essays. Terry enlisted the help of Michael, Hugh Prince at UCL, and myself to check and if necessary correct Darby’s text and to prepare the accompanying essays. When Terry died in 2000, Michael assumed the role of lead editor and, with financial support from the British Academy to employ a graduate student at the word processor, brought the volume to fruition. His contextual essay revealed the depth and breadth of his own knowledge of the historical geography of the USA, that had been reinforced by sabbatical years spent at Madison (1973, 1994), Chicago (1989) and Berkeley, California (1994).⁴⁷ Having already written the memorial essay on Darby for the British Academy, Michael now used a carefully crafted epilogue to trace the significance of Darby’s work in giving shape and substance to the subdiscipline of historical geography, and explored his role in training a succession of young scholars.⁴⁸ Michael

⁴⁴ M. Williams, *Deforesting the Earth* (abridged edn.) (Chicago, IL, 2006).

⁴⁵ M. Williams, ‘A new look at global forest histories of land clearing’, *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 33 (2008), 345–67.

⁴⁶ Heathcote, ‘Obituary: Michael Williams’.

⁴⁷ M. Williams, ‘H. C. Darby and the historical geography of the United States’, in M. Williams, with T. Coppock, H. Clout and H. C. Prince (eds.), *The Relations of History and Geography: Studies in England, France and the United States. Twelve Previously Unpublished Essays on Historical Geography by Henry Clifford Darby* (Exeter, 2002), pp. 186–202. The visit to Chicago enabled him to interact with historical geographer Michael Conzen, and during the second visit to Madison with William Cronon, the recently appointed Frederick Jackson Turner Professor of History, Geography and Environmental Studies.

⁴⁸ M. Williams, ‘Henry Clifford Darby’: ‘Epilogue: critique and evaluation’, in Williams *et al.* (eds.), *The Relations of History and Geography*, pp. 203–11.

insisted that Darby should be appraised on his own terms and in his own time, and insisted that it was pointless to interrogate his writing through a turn-of-the-century lens since it had been drafted decades previously and conceptualised earlier still. Without doubt, Michael held Darby and his scholarship in high regard but, like others, he regretted that ‘the changing landscape’ was often devoid of the people, influenced by new ideas and ideologies, which brought about its transformation.⁴⁹ Michael’s much appreciated editorial contribution to *The Relations of History and Geography: Studies in England, France and the United States* was arguably a labour of duty, rather than one of filial affection.⁵⁰

By contrast, Michael’s real passion in his final years centred on the work and life of Carl Ortwin Sauer (1889–1975) who had been a towering figure among cultural geographers and environmental thinkers, famed for his research on Central and Latin America, on the domestication of plants and animals, on the entry of man into the Americas, and the transformation of cultural landscapes across the globe. His work earned the deep respect of Darby who visited Sauer’s base in the Department of Geography at the University of California, Berkeley in 1952 and again in 1959 and 1963, and quoted his work extensively in his own teaching and writing. Michael shared that same fascination and his undergraduate seminars on Sauer were among his most memorable at Oxford. However, he was far from satisfied with a critical reading of the great man’s published work and delved deep into his life through interviews with members of Sauer’s family, and with his former colleagues and students, as well as interrogating his voluminous archive in the Bancroft Library at Berkeley. Among this material are to be found hundreds of letters received by Sauer and numerous carbon copies of items dispatched by him, including early letters written in German to his parents. Since Michael’s grasp of German was minimal, over a hundred of these personal letters were translated with love and dedication by Loré. Occasionally he had to reconstruct Sauer’s views from the replies he received, since copies of the original letters could not be traced. The man who emerged from all this research was both an academic master who headed the distinctive ‘Berkeley School’ of cultural geographers, and an ageing individual who was frustrated by the demands of university administrators and disillusioned by new trends not only in geography but also in anthropology and in the social sciences at

⁴⁹M. Williams, ‘Historical geography and the concept of landscape’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 15: 92–104.

⁵⁰On Darby’s ideas and writings, see P. J. Perry, ‘H. C. Darby and historical geography’.

large.⁵¹ His life path was, indeed, ‘endlessly interesting’ and was captured in the monograph that had absorbed Michael in his latter years and was all but completed at the time of his death. Each of the fourteen chapters had been written and only the final checking of the text and the bibliography had to be done. Many geographers on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond hope that this volume will be delivered for publication soon,⁵² since it will be an important contribution to the history of the discipline. In recognition of his sustained research, Michael had been invited to deliver his main findings at the twentieth ‘Carl O. Sauer Memorial Lecture’ at Berkeley on 26 October 2009, but his rapidly failing health meant that this had to be cancelled. By a cruel twist of fate, he died in Oxford on that very day, aged 74.

In memoriam

A few years ago, Michael told me that he was perplexed by many of the emerging strands of contemporary human geography and preferred to describe himself as an ‘environmental historian’, just as his preference was for reading historical rather than geographical journals.⁵³ Whatever his chosen title, he was a fine scholar whose research ranged in scale from the local in the Somerset Levels, through the regional in South Australia, to the continental in North America, and the global in *Deforesting the Earth*. His intellectual focus shifted over the years from research to elucidate ‘the making of the landscape’, to document-based syntheses of environmental change whose messages brought him closer to the fringes of environmental science. In 1991 he was awarded a D.Litt. from the University of Wales for his remarkable corpus of published work. He was a superb editor, a tactful chairman, an excellent teacher, and a caring supervisor of graduate students. In a non-imposing way, he shared his knowledge with doctoral candidates who drew inspiration from his enthusiasm for their work—as well as his own—and his attentiveness to their written style,

⁵¹ M. Williams, ‘The apple of my eye: Carl Sauer and historical geography’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 9 (1983), 1–28; ‘Sauer and *Man’s Role in Changing the Face of the Earth*’, *Geographical Review*, 77 (1987), 218–31; ‘Carl Sauer and the legacy of ‘Man’s Role’, in K. Mathewson and M. S. Kenzer (eds.), *Culture, Land and Legacy: Perspectives of Carl Sauer and the Berkeley School of Geography* (Baton Rouge, 2003), pp. 217–32.

⁵² By the University of Virginia Press.

⁵³ M. Williams, ‘The relations of environmental history and historical geography’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 20 (1994), 3–21.

ensuring that they conveyed their message in the clearest way and with the maximum effect. He was not one to be swept along by new academic fashions but rather developed his own unique way of interrogating the subject through meticulous library work and careful sifting and reorganisation of information to tell the story. He was never hasty to judge, seeing the best in people around him, and always sure and clear in his decisions. During his Oxford years, he liked working on ‘the big picture’ and all his books witness how he managed to link past and present processes in his historical explorations, often making those enquiries relevant to the present day, although he never wrote explicitly about his methodological approaches. ‘Landscape’ was his lifelong interest, which he explored in several ways, by tracing its formation, assessing its multiple meanings, and reviewing the place of landscape study in historical geography, environmental history, cultural geography and landscape archaeology.⁵⁴

To members of the School of Geography, Michael Williams was a courteous and hospitable colleague, and a single-minded and focused scholar of great international distinction. To Fellows of the British Academy, he was an effective member of Council, a business-like and expeditious chair of section, and an unfailingly friendly face. He is greatly missed by members of the ‘wider family’ of academics who had the privilege of knowing him, working with him, and laughing with him. Yet, Loré has confirmed:

Although he loved his subject and his work, his close family was always more important to him. He took great pride in his daughters’ careers, Cathy as a doctor and Tess as a lawyer. He was more proud of their achievement than his own. Not only did their achievements give cause for pride but they also brought a great deal of fun and love into both our lives. Because of them he acquired two sons-in-law who won his respect and love, and four lovely grandchildren. When he was in hospital, not able to sleep, he would visualize one grandchild at a time and imagine them playing.⁵⁵

Viewed from whatever perspective, the life and work of Professor Michael Williams, historical geographer and environmental historian of great international renown, will not be forgotten by those who knew him or by the many more that have drawn inspiration from his publications.

HUGH CLOUT

Fellow of the Academy

⁵⁴J. M. Powell, ‘Professor Michael Williams, 1935–2009’, *Australian Geographer*, 41 (2010), 425–7.

⁵⁵Words written by Mrs Williams to be spoken at Michael’s funeral.

Note. In preparing this essay, I have received invaluable help from Mrs Loré Williams; from Colin Clarke, Andrew Goudie, Jack Langton, Nick Middleton, Judith Pallot, Ceri Peach and Ian Scargill in Oxford; from Joe Powell, Peter Smailes, Gerard Ward and the late Les Heathcote in Australia; from Ron Johnston in Bristol, David Herbert in Swansea, Bill Mead and Hugh Prince in London, and Judith Tsouvalis in Lancaster; and from Diana Liverman in Arizona, and Philippe Le Billon in Vancouver. I extend my thanks to each of them.