ROBIN DONKIN

Robert Arthur Donkin
1928–2006

Robert Arthur ('Robin') Donkin was an exceptional scholar in both style and substance. Setting for himself very high standards of research and teaching, he expected others to do likewise for themselves. Meticulous in his search for answers to geographical questions about the past, he was so committed to a specific kind of historical geography and so convinced of its authenticity that he pursued it with total dedication and with disdain for the modish currents in Geography that ebbed and flowed around him. His firmly held ideas about historical geography and how to pursue it resulted in a significant body of original scholarship that will only slightly and slowly, if at all, be reshaped by subsequent researchers.

Formative years

Robin Donkin was born in his grandparents' house in Morpeth, Northumberland, on 28 October 1928. His father, Arthur, at the time of Robin's birth was a draper and shopkeeper but he had—and was to have—strong military associations. On leaving school in Morpeth, Arthur Donkin had enlisted in the army and was in the trenches in France during the Great War and then served with the British Army of Occupation in the Rhineland until 1919. Enlisted again in 1939, Arthur was posted to India and Burma where his unit was reported for nine months as 'missing'. Against that military background, Robin had a stable, modest, home life at Monkton in Jarrow that was both musical and bookish. Both of his parents played musical instruments—they first met as members of Morpeth Town

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Orchestra. His mother, Elizabeth Jane (*née* Kirkup), had left school when she was 15, trained as a secretary and then worked for a solicitor in Newcastle. His father, a largely self-educated man, read widely and accumulated a large collection of books that included works by Darwin, Kipling, T. E. Lawrence and Galsworthy. Family holidays—Robin had two younger sisters—were spent either on the Northumbrian coast or inland helping out on the farms of relatives. It seems that young Robin also went youth hostelling in the Lake District. With his families on both maternal and paternal sides being staunch Anglicans, Robin was for many years a choirboy.

From the local elementary school at Monkton, Robin went to Jarrow Grammar School and in 1947 took his Higher School Certificate in English, Geography and History. He then read Geography at King's College, Newcastle upon Tyne, when it was still under the aegis of Durham University. The first of his many publications was an essay on pioneer settlement that appeared during his first year as an undergraduate in the *King's College [Newcastle] Geographical Society Magazine*. He graduated in 1950 with a First Class degree and enrolled at Durham as a research student. The first of Robin's many adventurous travels abroad was as a postgraduate student: he acquired a motorcycle and in 1951 went with a companion to North Africa, sleeping rough alongside the bike *en route* in France and then in Tunisia and Libya. As an undergraduate, he had been most impressed by the teaching and writings of M. R. G. Conzen, who had fled Germany in the mid-1930s to escape the National Socialist regime. Conzen applied exacting standards to his painstaking research on what he called 'the cultural landscape' (a German geographical concept that embraced the natural landscape and its modification by human activities). He argued that such landscapes were best interpreted in terms of their forms or morphologies, their functions, and their changes through time. Robin was especially stimulated by Conzen's work on medieval towns and it was to him that he turned for a supervisor for his own doctoral research on the contribution of the Cistercians to the geography of England in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In practice, he consulted Conzen rarely about his doctoral research, preferring to beaver away independently in libraries, mainly that of the British Museum.

With the prospect of National Service looming, Robin resolved to complete his thesis in three years and was awarded a Ph.D. in 1953. While a research student, he had participated in the 1952 Durham University Exploration Society's expedition to Morocco: his later travels were to be solo affairs, except, of course, those undertaken while doing his National Service between 1953 and 1955. After training at Rhyll, Oswestry and

Woolwich, Robin was—to the immense delight of his father—commissioned as a lieutenant in the Royal Artillery and posted to the Canal Zone in Egypt. He always claimed that he learned to drive in the desert and when taking a few days leave purchased a camera and drove to Cairo and to the Pyramids. Proud of his military connection, in later life he often wore his regimental tie and had the bearing of an army officer.

Looking beyond his time as a conscript, Robin had applied for and was awarded a King George VI Memorial Fellowship to enable him to spend 1955–6 at the University of California, Berkeley. This was to be an especially formative experience but his precise reasons for going to Berkeley cannot be established with certainty. Some forty years later, he claimed that it was as an undergraduate that he had

> stumbled on Sauer's writings—two classic papers, both published in 1941, 'Foreward [*sic*] to historical geography' and 'The personality of Mexico', and, a little later, his long chapter on 'Cultivated plants' in the *Handbook of South American Indians*. Here were new pastures and a new approach, culled from the living world, for which I wasn't then prepared; but I determined to return in mind and, if possible in body, when the opportunity arose, as in fact it did in 1955.[1]

Robin took a boat across the Atlantic and then trains across the United States to California. His time there during 1955–6 was to have a profound impression upon him and his research projects. He fell completely under the spell of Carl Sauer and the Berkeley school of historical and cultural geography. Sauer's graduate seminars on topics as varied as the domestication of plants and animals, the impact of early human settlement in the Americas, and the Spanish conquest of Latin America enthralled him. Intriguingly, his time at Berkeley went unrecorded in Sauer's voluminous correspondence, except for one occasion when Sauer, who was on a preretirement sabbatical in Europe, enquired of his secretary, Westher Hess, about his graduate students. After itemising the progress of some of them, she added: 'We do not see much of Donkin, he spends most of his time in the [Bancroft] Library.' It was there, as a follow-up to his study of the Cistercians, that he researched the contribution of the Franciscan missions to the settlement of southern California between 1769 and 1823.[2] It was clearly Robin's sojourn in Berkeley that laid the solid foundations for the interests he was later to pursue in the historical geography of Latin

[1] R. A. Donkin, 'A "servant of two masters"?', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 23 (1997), 247–66.
[2] R. A. Donkin, 'The contribution of the Franciscan missions to the settlement of Alta California colonisation 1769–1823', *Revista de Historia de America*, 52 (1961), 373–93.

America and in the domestication of plants and animals globally. In a rare published statement about influences on his career, Robin admitted much later that it was geographers at Berkeley who first turned his interests toward the aboriginal New World.[3] But those interests had to lie relatively dormant until he had established himself in the British university system and until he had satisfied himself that he had published all that he had to say about the Cistercians in England.

Edinburgh 1956–1958 and Birmingham 1958–1970

On returning to the United Kingdom in 1956, Robin took up a post as Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Geography at the University of Edinburgh. He was the only historical geographer in that department, which was then led by J. Wreford Watson, a regional geographer sensitive to the role of historical explanation in geography. While busily preparing new lecture courses, Robin initiated what was to become a massive record of publications.[4] During his two years at Edinburgh, he published six papers on the Cistercians and one on an early nineteenth-century source for studying the geography of California.

In 1958 Robin moved to an Assistant Lectureship in Geography at the University of Birmingham, being upgraded the following year to a full Lectureship, a post that he held until he took up a Lectureship in Cambridge from January 1971. With teaching historical geography at Birmingham largely the domain of Harry Thorpe, he found himself mainly delivering general courses on human geography. He put a Sauerian stamp on them. His first year course ranged very widely in time and space, covering the origins of life on earth, the early dispersal routes of mankind, the domestication of plants and animals, the development of the world's agricultural systems, of urbanism and of early civilisations. For most freshmen undergraduates, such an introduction to human geography was a cultural shock. It was an introduction to the rigorous scholarship and intellectual curiosity of Robin rather than to the current fashions and fads of the 'new geography' being taught in most British universities in the 1960s. His third year course on 'advanced human geography' reflected strongly his experience of Sauer's teaching at Berkeley. It consisted of two

[3] R. A. Donkin, *Agricultural Terracing in the Aboriginal New World* (Tucson, AZ, 1979), p. xi.
[4] There is no published comprehensive listing of his publications so one is provided at the end of this memoir.

parts, a set of lectures by Robin and of seminars presented by individual students. His lectures having provided an in-depth study of agricultural origins and dispersals and their impacts on cultural landscapes, the seminars focused on changes to landscapes associated with the introduction of particular plants and animals. Philip Jones recalls that his seminar topic was 'French colonisation in Algeria with special reference to the introduction of viticulture'. For such seminars, Robin allowed students access to his vast card indexes and encouraged them to prepare comprehensive handouts for their own seminars, including maps, statistical tables and extensive bibliographies. Other members of staff often attended these seminars, which many undergraduates came to regard as highlights of their Birmingham days. Robin also taught some shorter courses on the conservation geography of Mediterranean lands and, within the School of History, on the historical geography of the Americas. He issued students with unforgettably long reading lists and expected them to read widely and thoughtfully before proffering their own views and conclusions. In the intimate setting of his tutorial groups, his style was forensic, a constant flow of penetrating questions educating students into a deep suspicion of shallow explanations.

Students were not only inspired by Robin's high standards of teaching but also by his lifestyle and approachability. A dashing, dapper and somewhat eccentric bachelor figure in his thirties, he stood out from his colleagues by his smart country wear, his smoking of small cigars and his driving a large, Burgundy coloured, and convertible, Alvis car. He was a tutor at one of the university's halls of residence, Manor House, a huge mock Tudor house given to the university by the local chocolate making company, Cadburys, and set in bosky suburbs. He enjoyed the company of students. In his book-filled flat, he hosted sherry evenings for groups of students, not least for the graduate students of the Department of Geography, whether they were physical, contemporary human or historical geographers. As one former student put it, Robin's 'conversations were always unthreatening, with a line in mock sarcasm to deal with things he was not so sure about, and we came away flattered by his interest in us and thinking more carefully than before'. Another said that 'to those who did not know Robin well, he was a shy and rather distant member of staff with a formidable reputation' but 'on a one-to-one basis he was a "different" person—warm, encouraging, constructively critical and supportive'.

While at Birmingham, Robin travelled a great deal. His interest in travel and exploration led him to join the Hakluyt Society in 1962. He took undergraduate field classes to Wales, the Lake District, Brittany and

Provence; he travelled independently during the vacations to Italy, Sardinia, Provence, Spain and Portugal. He went to Seville for Spanish language courses. But he also began to build on his Latin American interests developed at Berkeley. A Leverhulme Research Fellowship held in 1966–7 enabled him to travel to Middle America, where he worked in libraries in Mexico City, La Paz, Lima, Bogotá and Caracas and in the field in Mexico, Guatemala and the northern and central Andes. In the field he travelled using local transport and also walked long distances, staying in basic accommodation with local people. Transport was clearly an enjoyable challenge for Robin: he travelled from England to Middle America from Port Sunlight, courtesy of a Shell oil tanker, and at the end of his trip he returned with Shell from Curaçao to Rotterdam. Another Latin Americanist, Jock H. Galloway, arranged for Robin to be an invited Visiting Associate Professor of Geography at the University of Toronto for 1968–9. His teaching there completed, he took the opportunity from June to September to work in the library of the Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin and then to undertake field work in Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Mexico. In the field, he again made the point of using local transport—including mules—and basic accommodation.

Throughout his years at Edinburgh and Birmingham, Robin pursued two research strands: one was a continuation of his doctoral work on the Cistercians, the other was the initiation of his work on Latin America. By the time he left Birmingham, in December 1970, he had almost closed down his research on the Cistercians, so it will be appropriate to consider that work before following him to Cambridge.

But before doing so, there is one very personal consequence of Robin's sojourn at Birmingham that demands attention. Among the undergraduates who attended his lectures when she arrived at Birmingham in 1960 was Jennifer Kennedy, whom Robin married ten years later. After graduating in 1963, Jennifer undertook Voluntary Service Overseas for two years in the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides (Vanuatu), Western Pacific, and for a short period worked in the British Council Library at Suva, Fiji; during 1965–6 she was a library trainee at the University of St Andrews and at the University of British Columbia; during 1966–7 she obtained a postgraduate Diploma in Librarianship and Archives from University College London and for the next three years was an Assistant Librarian at York University. In 1970 Jennifer was offered a post in the library of the newly founded University of the South Pacific in Fiji but by then she had for some years been in touch with Robin

and they were married on 12 September 1970, a few months before he took up his new post in Cambridge in January 1971. Jennifer was Assistant Librarian at Fitzwilliam College from 1971 until 1976. Their daughter, Lucy, was born on 6 April 1977.

The Cistercians

Publications did not flow from Robin's 1953 doctoral dissertation on the Cistercians until after he had completed his National Service and his visit to Berkeley. Then, between 1957 and 1969, intensifying and extending his doctoral research, he published twenty papers on the geographical impact of the Cistercian Order in Europe (but especially in England and Wales) during the medieval period. Robin was, of course, building on a corpus of earlier work on Cistercian settlement by medieval monastic historians like David Knowles. The Order's objectives of livelihood self-sufficiency and physical isolation had attracted the attention of many historians but their work lacked the geographical perspective that he brought to the topic. A succession of articles addressed the many ways in which the Cistercians impacted upon landscape, economy and society: they included the Cistercians' highly profitable trade in wool and cattle; marshland reclamation and woodland clearance; forest management; settlement and depopulation; investment in urban properties; markets and fairs; and the foundation of granges, the granaries in which were stored the large quantities of cereals harvested from reclaimed lands. His work on the Cistercians was usefully summarised in three publications: a valedictory article, a bibliography and a book.

In 1963 Robin published 'some conclusions' about the Cistercians in medieval England as landowners, pioneers, stockmen and traders, stressing those conclusions which modified the then prevailing view of the Order.[5] He argued that the monks were not only pioneers and innovators but also catalysts of wide change throughout the twelfth and much of the thirteenth centuries. His approach was that of an historical geographer: his detailed attention to development through time was illustrated by his histogram of Cistercian foundations in Europe and the Near East between 1100 and 1500, while his detailed attention to spread through space was demonstrated in, for example, distribution maps of medieval Benedictine

[5] R. A. Donkin, 'The Cistercian Order in Medieval England: some conclusions', *Transactions and Papers of the Institute of British Geographers*, 33 (1963), 181–98.

and Cistercian monasteries in England and Wales, of Cistercian houses with tanneries and/or vaccaries, of Cistercian houses with fulling mills, and of Cistercian houses with property in London. That Robin had perhaps intended this to be his valedictory paper on the Cistercians is indicated not only by its titular stress upon his 'conclusions' about their activities but also by the fact that the only references cited were to fourteen of his own papers. This highly unusual but perfectly logical device is itself indicative of his somewhat eccentric but carefully considered approach. In fact, however, he had not finished with the Cistercians. He went on to publish two further papers on them and two other major works.

In 1969 Robin published a *Cistercian Bibliography*, at the time a pioneering bibliography of printed works relating to the Cistercian Order as a whole and to the Houses of the British Isles in particular. This bibliography, of more than 100 pages and 1,500 items, revealed the extensive range of printed works from the fifteenth century onwards, not only in English but also in many other languages that he used as the source materials for his work. Then, in 1978, he brought together his final thoughts on the Order in his 242-page book dedicated to his parents: *The Cistercians: Studies in the Geography of Medieval England and Wales.* This was, in effect, a massive updating of his doctoral thesis written twenty-five years previously. Its first chapter traced the spread of the Order throughout Europe and described the changes that occurred as a result of resiting by houses in England and Wales. The following chapter considered the question of depopulation and the grange as the key to the Cistercian economy. The next two chapters focused on pastoral farming and the winning of new land at the expense of woodland, waste and fen. Questions relating to trade, the ownership of markets and urban property were addressed in the penultimate chapter. A final postscript examined the role of the white monks as agents for the diffusion of new ideas and technologies and showed how the Order became involved in affairs of state when, towards the end of the thirteenth century, abbots in considerable numbers were called to parliament. Eleven appendices tabulated—to the benefit of future Cistercian scholars—the detailed factual scaffolding Robin had painstakingly erected to enable him to reveal the geography of the Cistercians in twenty-five maps and a meticulously crafted text. This culmination of his work on the Cistercians represents the peak of a mountain of the highest-quality historical and geographical scholarship. A widely admired enterprise, it influenced strongly D. M. Robinson's 1980 study *The Geography of Augustinian Settlement in Medieval England and Wales*.[6]

[6] Published in two volumes in Oxford as *British Archaeological Reports*, 80 (1980).

While gradually closing down his Cistercian enterprise, Robin was opening a new Latin American project and his move from Birmingham to Cambridge was pivotal in that transformation. With hindsight, he concluded that his charting of the contribution of the Cistercian Order to the geography of medieval England was perhaps closer to the tradition of Berkeley than to that established by H. C. Darby in England.[7]

Cambridge 1971–1996

During 1970, funding became available at Cambridge for a Lectureship in the Geography of Latin America, one of the by-products of the Parry Committee's urging of central government to promote study of the region. Professor H. C. Darby, a leading historical geographer who was then head of the Department of Geography at Cambridge, admired Robin's work on the Cistercians and had engaged him while at Birmingham to write the chapter on changes in the early Middle Ages for his new, edited, historical geography of England, published in 1973. Darby knew that Robin's interests were turning towards Latin America and so invited him to apply for the new Lectureship. Robin did so and in August 1970 he was appointed to the Lectureship from 1 October 1970. But he was obliged to give one Term's notice to Birmingham and so Cambridge agreed to his request to defer taking up his appointment until 1 January 1971. He was subsequently promoted to be Reader in Historical Geography from 1 October 1990 and two years after that he was approved by Cambridge for the Litt.D. degree. In 1972 he had been elected as a Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge and in 1985 as a Fellow of the British Academy.

At Cambridge, Robin was able to give lecture courses closely related to his own research interests. He taught a first year course on 'human geography' (later more trendily marketed by the Department as 'environment and resources') which focused on the domestication of plants and animals and on the development of basic systems of agriculture and animal husbandry. He contributed a few lectures on Latin America to a course on contemporary economic development but took sole responsibility for a full course on the cultural geography of Latin America. In addition, he delivered a few lectures on the monastic orders in Robin Glasscock's course on the geography of medieval Britain and two lectures on Carl Sauer and the Berkeley school of cultural geography embedded within a shared course on geographical ideas and methods.

[7] Donkin, 'A "servant of two masters"?', p. 247.

To undergraduates, Robin's empirical lectures on agricultural origins and indigenous peoples were a contrast in their subject matter to the kind of geography they had learned at school and in their style to the quantitative and theoretical geography being promoted by many lecturers at Cambridge in the 1970s and 1980s. Former students remember him as a fluent and polished lecturer, articulating precisely many memorable phrases in a seemingly spontaneous manner even though they had been meticulously prepared. To his rapt student audience, he conveyed a depth of enthusiasm and a breadth of scholarship that marked him apart from many of his colleagues. His lectures were authoritative, inspirational, thought-provoking and clearly grounded in his own deep and genuine intellectual curiosity. For many undergraduates at Cambridge—as also for many at Birmingham—his lectures opened windows onto new worlds and did so in ways that they remember with warmth and gratitude today.

It was also a very memorable experience to be taught by Robin in small groups of two to four students in a 'supervision'. His office, where he conducted supervisions from behind a desk covered in papers and his Olivetti typewriter, was full of books, of curious artefacts collected on his travels, of files for thousands of record cards, and of smoke from his cherished pipe. He continued to use his beloved Olivetti, on which he had typed his doctoral dissertation in 1953, until his death fifty-three years later.

More important than the stage setting for Robin's supervisions was the drama enacted by him and his students, for some of whom supervisions were a daunting experience. Robin set high standards of scholarship for himself and expected undergraduates to do so for themselves. He engaged very positively with students who had read and thought about the topic in hand but he made it clear that he thought that students who had not prepared thoroughly for the occasion had let both themselves and him down. He cared about students both in the Department and at Jesus College, even if some of them did not share his high standards of scholarship and morality or find it easy to deal with what, on a first encounter, seemed to be an austere and shy persona. Although he could be hard-edged with students academically, he was also—as one his former undergraduates put it—'someone with a very gentle, open and caring attitude'.

Robin impressed not only many undergraduates but also, for a variety of reasons, many of his Cambridge colleagues. For them, he was first and last a serious scholar with very high standards. None could question that in relation to his research but it could and did lead him into differences of opinion with his colleagues over some other issues. Three examples come

to mind. First, when examining for the Geographical Tripos, Robin was very reluctant to award many Firsts on the grounds that a First Class at Cambridge was the 'gold standard' and should not be devalued. At meetings of the Board of Examiners he would mount spirited opposition to awarding a First to a candidate whose work included a spread of Second Class marks. 'You have known these students for three years', he would challenge his co-examiners, 'how many really first class minds are there amongst them?' Second, in June 1995 Robin wrote to complain to Dr Keith Richards, Head of the Department of Geography, that he had just spent a week marking scripts for the paper on 'Environment and Resources' for Part IA of the Tripos and that it was an experience he did not wish to repeat: 'I am unsuited to marking essays on "environmental policy" (read *politics*) which seem to permeate every answer. Many bear the marks of prepared statements to rehearsed questions, PR style, starved of natural science and of originality … I am unwilling to act as an examiner for Part IA of the Geographical Tripos, 1996.' Despite Dr Richards' pleading, Robin held to his principles and he was not a tripos examiner in 1996, his final year as a university officer. Third, in early 1993 the Degree Committee of the Faculty of Earth Sciences and Geography was recommended by two examiners to approve the award of a Ph.D. degree to a candidate for his submitted dissertation. Robin, a member of the Committee, had read the dissertation and voted against the recommendation. He found himself in a minority of one, because the Committee accepted the recommendation by 11 votes to 1, with two abstentions. Three days after the Committee's meeting, he wrote to the Secretary of the Committee, resigning his membership from both the Degree Committee and the Faculty Board on the grounds that, in his opinion, the reports of the two examiners did not justify their joint recommendation. As Head of Department at the time, I asked Robin to reconsider his position. I made two points: first, that the Committee's decision had been reached democratically and that to find oneself in a minority on a university committee was not a sufficient ground for resigning (if all university officers were to act in such a way, the business of a university would soon grind to a halt); and second, that his stand on a matter of principle would in practice mean additional work for the colleague who would have to be found to replace him on the committee. On my advice and at my request, he generously withdrew his resignation. He was high-minded but not intransigent.

Robin's teaching and research gave him reason to be proud but he was a modest man easily embarrassed by what he considered to be too much attention. When Geoffrey Harcourt, a Fellow of Jesus College,

congratulated him on his being promoted as a Reader, Robin dismissed the comment saying that there was no cause for any such remark. It might have been that he attached little value to what Harcourt, a left-wing economist, thought about him. But such self-effacement was characteristic of Robin. Another such incident throws further light on his personality. As Robin approached retirement, the Head of Department (Keith Richards) wanted to mark it in some appropriate way. The idea of a special lecture by a distinguished scholar was floated. But Robin wrote to Richards on 29 March 1996: 'On reflection, I have gone off the idea of a lecture. It would take time and trouble to prepare, and, in any case, I cannot at the moment think of anyone who could reasonably be approached, who is "geographical" (for the sake of the occasion and the audience), and who [*sic*] I particularly wish to hear … Least trouble would be (as you kindly suggested) a glass of wine after the final staff meeting of the year, provided there are no speeches.' Richards understandably followed convention and organised a collection among Robin's colleagues and on 30 October, shortly after Robin's tenure had expired, wrote to him to ask for a time when he and his wife could attend a very informal gathering in the Head of Department's office, just to toast him on his retirement. Richards told Robin that there had been a collection for him and that he enclosed, paid for from that source, two tickets for a London performance of Georges Bizet's opera *The Pearl Fishers*—an ingenious but ill-judged gesture that Richards thought would be appreciated because Robin was at that time writing a book on pearl fishing from its origins to the Age of Discoveries. Robin's reply, on 4 November 1996, returning the tickets, is illuminating: 'Your letter left me feeling very uncomfortable. I hoped that my wishes would be accepted—that there would be no presentation and no gathering. We cannot use these embarrassingly expensive tickets. Now I fear that I have offended you all, which I much regret.' Richards could not let the matter rest there—the money collected on Robin's behalf had to be used for its intended purpose. So, on 8 December, Richards delivered to him at Jesus College an eminently suitable two-volumes' 1868 edition of Charles Darwin's *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication* together with a 'best wishes' card signed by his colleagues in the department. Robin wrote to Richards on 18 December: 'The Darwin volumes! How very, very kind—a quite perfect parting gift and, along with the signed card, so much appreciated. I am most grateful and honoured. The immediate pleasure was all the keener since it came after a long and not particularly rewarding day in the B.L.[British Library]! You will, I know, convey my warmest thanks to the Department as a whole.'

In dress, demeanour and discussion Robin was a distinctive and apparently incongruous visitor to the common room of the department. His deceptively quiet, other-worldly, appearance had an 'old England' touch about it: he was smartly dressed, often in what some considered to be old-fashioned brown tweed suits, proudly wearing his 'Gunner' tie and sporting a silk handkerchief in his breast pocket: this at a time when many 'dons'—aping undergraduates—were much less formerly attired. In contrast to the often raucous badinage of some of his colleagues in the department's common room, Robin's quiet (unless broken by his extraordinarily loud and body-shaking laugh) conversations with his colleagues were intellectual, showing interest in their endeavours and relating them often to his own. Bill Adams, an Africanist, recalls Robin asking him what he knew about early Portuguese descriptions of Africa or archaeological debates about the plough in the Sahel or about the spread of the banana in East Africa. All of which was a contrast with discussions elsewhere in the common room about the weekend's football results or the latest frontier or model in geography. Mark Billinge, another of Robin's colleagues, recalls that he 'was distinctly old-fashioned: polite, moral, judgemental, erudite and proper. He was also enormous fun: irreverent, cheeky, full of fun.' Adams remembers that Robin's most censorious put-down of other geographers whose work he considered to be insufficiently scholarly was to say: 'I haven't seen him/her in the UL [University Library] recently.' Robin conveyed what another of his colleagues, Derek Gregory, described as 'an artfully cultivated image of a civilised man marooned amidst the barbarisms of the modern world'. But to some extent Robin himself undermined that image, for sometimes outside the common room was parked his sand-coloured (officially, a geographically appropriate 'Limestone') and somewhat battered-looking, short wheelbase, Land Rover. Robin sold his Alvis for about £50 in 1970, on leaving Birmingham, and at Cambridge in early 1971 purchased his Land Rover for £1,600, presumably subscribing to the description in the company's brochure that 'the man who buys a Land Rover wants something more than an ordinary car'. He held on to the vehicle during his lifetime. Although an expeditionary vehicle, he never took it abroad. Perhaps on the three miles' journey between his home in the village of Barton and the university he dreamed of far away places! He did take the Land Rover on frequent 'expeditions' to the Lake District, where the Donkin family owned a house and where Robin had great enjoyment tending the fell-side garden.

Whenever Robin was in the common room of the Department of Geography, he was usually on his way by bicycle to or from Jesus College

or the University Library, his 'second home'. Although he played his full part as a lecturer and as an examiner for the Geographical Tripos, and as a member of the Faculty Committee and of the Degree Committee, he never taught any practical classes nor did he lead any field classes while at Cambridge. His expertise and knowledge, he was able to claim, lay elsewhere—thereby reserving to himself more time for research in the University Library and in 'his' special field in Latin America and other foreign places.

During his almost twenty-six years in the Department of Geography at Cambridge, Robin used a number of sabbaticals to travel abroad to work in libraries and in the field. In 1972 he went to Bolivia, Argentina, Ecuador and Brazil and in 1979–80 to Mexico and Guatemala. With his research interests broadening beyond Latin America, he travelled in 1987 to India, Goa, China, Hainan Island, Macau and Hong Kong and in 1994 to Pakistan, going through the Karakorum Pass to Gilgit, the Hunza valley and to the oasis city of Kashgar in remote northwest China. As was his custom, he travelled alone, using local transport and basic accommodation. Jennifer, his wife, never travelled with him, in part because she remained at home to look after their daughter, Lucy, and in part because Robin preferred to travel on his own to his research outposts with their often-limited facilities. Jennifer thinks that Robin's self-reliance when travelling perhaps reflected his awareness of the physical hardships that his father had had to endure in the trenches of the First World War and in Burma when he went missing during the Second World War. Whatever the reason, there can be no doubt that such travels abroad combined with tramping the long corridors of the University Library in Cambridge enabled Robin to produce an extraordinary corpus of scholarship.

Latin America and beyond

While at Berkeley during 1955–6, Robin launched his research interest in Latin America by travelling to Mexico, Guatemala and Cuba. But it did not really gain momentum until 1966–7, much of which he spent in Middle and South America, to be followed by a further six months' sojourn there in 1969. But although initially based in Latin American countries, Robin's research interests were essentially thematic and he soon moved beyond those countries to embrace many areas of the globe in his quest to discover more about the early domestication of plants and animals and related interactions between the Old and New Worlds. These issues

fired Robin into producing a remarkable set of meticulously researched monographs.

The first to be published, *Spanish Red*, in 1977, had as its subject cochineal, a red dye-stuff that Mexican and Peruvian Indians had for centuries obtained from an insect (a species of the genus /*Dactylopius*/). Robin argued that cochineal was 'the most widely traded and, next to gold and silver, the most valuable product of the Spanish Indies. Moreover, in no other colonial enterprise were the aboriginal associations so pronounced; production was left almost entirely in the hands of the Indian population.' With astonishing diligence, he traced information from the beginning of the sixteenth century onwards on the rearing of the insect in the highlands of Middle and South America and on the preparation of the dyestuff, mining *codices* of native origin, natural histories, official reports and historico-geographical surveys. For the Old World, his sources included herbals, floras, and diverse scientific reports; state papers; trading records and commercial directories; travellers' accounts; and, from about 1820, pamphlets written to advise prospective farmers. With the information laboriously harvested from such sources, Robin mapped the extent of cochineal culture in the New World and the introduction of insects and their host cacti in the Old World. Detailed lists of published references to the raising of cochineal from pre-Hispanic times to the mid-twentieth century were accompanied by distribution maps of such references. He produced an astonishing story of an historically rare phenomenon, the domestication of dye insects. Within about a hundred years of the conquest of Mexico, cochineal was being employed in the textile- and leather-working cities of Eurasia and North Africa. The cochineal 'industry' prospered, with cochineal becoming one of most valued commodities carried to the Old World from its colonies until its use was eclipsed during the nineteenth century by the use of aniline (synthetic) dyes.

A very different focus is found in Robin's second monograph, *Agricultural Terracing in the Aboriginal New World* (1979). This was much more concerned with the cultural landscape and was based on considerable work in the field as well as in libraries. It was a close examination of the evidence for extensive agricultural terracing in Middle and South America: it embraced, breathtakingly, terracing in the arid and semi-arid highlands of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina. Robin combined his own observations in the field with references to agricultural terracing diligently excavated from the topographical, ethnographical and archaeological literature of the New Word. Detailed descriptions of specific sets of terraces,

many of them abandoned, were set within a general discussion of the fundamental characteristics of pre-Hispanic agriculture and of its range of field implements. Evidence for the construction, use and abandonment of these agricultural terraces was carefully weighed. Although having similar forms, they might have had different origins and functions. Abandonment might have been a product of climatic or demographic change. Although his study could not answer conclusively all of the questions that such terraces pose, his work remains the definitive statement about them. The broad scope of this study of terracing in the aboriginal New World as a whole connected with regional and local studies of terracing conducted by William Denevan and his students in Peru, Bolivia, and Venezuela both before and after Robin's work.

Those who consider Robin's concerns to have been esoteric find strong support in his next monograph, *Manna: an Historical Geography* (1980). The description 'manna' has no uniform or precise meaning, nor is it applied exclusively to any one substance. It is used to refer to any sweet substance or honey-like gum either exuded from the branches or leaves of plants or trees (occasioned by unusually high atmospheric temperatures or by the punctures of insects or artificial incisions) or excreted by insects in the form of honey-dew or, exceptionally, of protective cocoons. The cultural use of manna has not involved domestication: in the hot dry lands of the Old World, with which it has been chiefly referenced, it has simply been collected. Following his now familiar 'method' (although he would never have referred to it as such), Robin searched with extreme diligence for reports on manna in printed works from the sixteenth century onwards. He discovered some 250 species of Old World plants associated with the product, principally in the hot and dry lands of western and west-central Asia. He found very few references to manna in the Americas. He showed that manna was used both as a sweetener and as a medication. Furthermore, he demonstrated that the nature of the substance was apparently nowhere properly understood until the early medieval period, and even until much later it was widely held to be some kind of dew, condensed from the atmosphere. Its mysterious origins invited speculation and it acquired a reputation as a supernatural 'gift' or 'bonus'—as nectar or ambrosia of the gods—throughout and well beyond the main areas of supply. The relatively recent spread and ultimately dominance of cane sugar have not entirely displaced the use of manna, Robin argued, because their properties differ and local recipes and traditional remedies have preserved the preferences and knowledge of past centuries.

During the next twenty-five years, Robin published six more monographs and there was another completed typescript with a publisher at the time of his death in 2006. In *The Peccary* (1985) he traced the history and geography of the New World peccary. Primarily a forest or woodland animal, the peccary was never domesticated (that is, bred regularly in captivity) by traditional societies but it was hunted as perhaps their single most important source of meat. Europeans valued their meat but even more their hides. He suggested that the conditions and processes that might have led to their domestication were disrupted by the European conquest of the Americas and by the associated introduction of the domesticated Old World pig. His historical geography of the peccary covered a wide range of topics: for example, he mapped the local and regional names given to the animal; he detailed both the techniques used to hunt them and the products of the kill; and he explored the peccary in ceremony and myth. In this monograph, he made a rare (for him) excursion into comparative analysis. He pointed out how distinctive was the process of animal domestication in the humid tropics, where grazing animals were not present until introduced from elsewhere. Management of animals involved, in all three tropical regions of the world, the rearing or full domestication of one pig-like scavenger and one or two large bird scavengers, with all the animals being attracted to sedentary horticultural settlements in which some surplus food was available. He simply noted this as a pattern, without attempting any kind of explanation. A former colleague, Tim Bayliss-Smith, thinks that this was and remains 'an original observation of almost Sauerian scope, but characteristically Robin tossed it out and never (I think) attempted again this kind of global synthesis'.

In the Preface to his next monograph, *The Muscovy Duck, Cairina moschata domestica: Origins, Dispersal, and Associated Aspects of the Geography of Domestication* (1989), Robin provided a justification for writing it: 'Years ago, in the first issue of *Acta Americana* (1943), Carl Sauer called for information about the Muscovy, where and why it was kept. This monograph is a belated and inadequate response to that request.' Here is evidence both of his indebtedness to Sauer and of his own modesty. The New World had few domesticated animals but among them was the Muscovy duck which, together with the guinea pig and the turkey, had been introduced into Europe by the middle of the sixteenth century. He mapped the recorded distribution of the Muscovy duck, wild and domesticated, in the Americas before detailing its introduction and diffusion in Europe and west-central Asia, in Africa and in southern Asia and Oceania.

There followed four studies in similar vein: (1) of the anthropogenic dispersal of the guinea fowl (*Meleagrides: an Historical and Ethnographical Study of the Guinea Fowl*, 1991)—which Robin dedicated to Carl Sauer; (2) of pearls and pearl-fishing from its origins to the Age of Discoveries (*Beyond Price: Pearls and Pearl Fishing*, 1998)—this time dedicated to his wife and daughter; (3) of the Indonesian origins and diffusion of camphor, the source of a powerful perfume (*Dragon's Brain Perfume: an Historical Geography of Camphor*, 1999)—dedicated to 'the editors of countless primary sources and to the librarians around the world who have made these and much else available to me, 1948–1998'; and (4) the Indonesian archipelago of the Moluccas and the traffic in spices until the arrival of Europeans in the fifteenth century (*Between East and West: the Moluccas and the Traffic in Spices up to the Arrival of the Europeans*, 2003)—dedicated to James Parsons, a distinguished Berkeley geographer in the Sauerian tradition who died in 1997 and with whom Robin had been in contact since his Californian visit in 1955–6. The last two of these books signalled his developing interest in geographical discovery and trade. It comes as no surprise that at the time of his death in 2006 he had completed a book on maritime exploration in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans before 1500: it is to be published posthumously by the American Philosophical Society. Robin had also begun work on his intended next book, on maize. He had by then moved a long way from the Cistercians where his own scholarly explorations had begun in Durham in 1950 and even moved a long way beyond his Latin American expeditions launched seriously in Cambridge in 1971.

An independent scholar

That Robin was in the Rare Books Room of Cambridge University Library on the day before he died on 1 February 2006 is symptomatic of his almost obsessive dedication to research. His retirement years saw the publication of three monographs, the writing of a fourth and research begun for a fifth one. Even so, his productivity in retirement was stalled by a serious accident in July 1997, when he was knocked off his bicycle by a car near to Barton, his village home just outside Cambridge, sustaining arm, leg and rib fractures as well as concussion. His injuries required medical attention for almost three years but, typically, he bore his misfortune with great fortitude.

Robin was unequivocally an eminent historical geographer whose work embraced an astonishing range of historical, archaeological, anthropological, zoological, botanical and iconographical evidence. Moreover, his work was remarkably international in terms of both its evidential base and the countries in which his monographs were published (Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the USA). His prodigious work both on the impact of the Cistercians on the medieval English landscape, economy and society and on the cultural significance, in carefully tracked periods and places, of particular exotic plants and animals stands as an impressive memorial to a life dedicated to historical and geographical scholarship of the highest order. His was a life of historical and geographical discovery, in many ways like those of the explorers and travellers upon whose observations he based his own work. 'Facts about origin, expansion and distribution, how man's artefacts and possessions come to be where they are', Robin wrote, 'lie at the heart of Human Geography as taught by [Friedrich] Ratzel, [Paul] Vidal [de la Blache] and Sauer. Such facts are not usually to be found in convenient blocks of readily mappable surveys, but rather eclectically in the literature and in the field, not strictly random but difficult to recover and to assimilate.'[8] He saw his task as that of recovery and assimilation. He collected, sorted, and dated and then tabulated and mapped masses of data drawn from an amazing array of printed sources. In the case of the Cistercians, he assimilated his painstakingly discovered 'facts' into a synthesis of his findings and his interpretation of them. No such overarching synthesis emerged from Robin's individually important work on agricultural terracing, on the historical geography of some exotic plants and animals, and on exploration and trade. Instead, his fascination with each topic seems to have totally absorbed him. While his monographs do set their specific matters of concern within broader contexts, he did not venture far into 'big picture', generalised, portrayals.

Professional caution and personal modesty probably restrained him from doing so: for Robin, a scholar's work could never claim with justification to be definitive, there would always be more work to be done. He offered his monograph on agricultural terracing as 'a preliminary study', saying in a postscript to it that 'the study of agricultural terracing in the New World has scarcely begun'; he cautioned that his study of cochineal, with its 800 or so references, 'must necessarily be regarded as provisional' and his study of manna, with a similar number of citations, concluded

[8] R. A. Donkin, *The Muscovy Duck* (Rotterdam, 1989), p. vii.

that 'further research is needed on the mannas of the New World'; while his work on the peccary, citing about 1,000 sources, had as a concluding sentence a suggestion of what 'future research may show'.[9] In one sense, it was a pity that Robin did not take his own advice: instead, having produced a monograph on one subject he moved onto another.

What enthralled Robin, he confessed in a letter of 13 October 2004 to a former Cambridge colleague, Tim Bayliss-Smith, was 'esoteric knowledge' of the kind he had encountered at Berkeley some fifty years earlier, knowledge acquired in 'the old German historico-geographical tradition' as taught by Conzen, his own research supervisor. He admitted that, 'for better or worse', he had missed the 'New Geography' of quantification and model building. He simply admired the way in which, as he saw it, at Berkeley people asked 'questions of the kind that interested (and still interest) me, but no-one worried about how you set about answering them'. He had little time for discussions of the nature and methodology of geography. He was only once seduced into discussing such matters, by a former Cambridge colleague, David Stoddart, who arranged for him to give the Carl O. Sauer Memorial Lecture at Berkeley in 1995. Robin explained how he had become 'a servant of two masters', history and geography.[10] He had been 'born and brought up in the Anglo-Scottish Border, where reminders of a turbulent past are rarely out of sight—formidable castles, fortified churches, ruined monasteries, not to mention the greatest of all Roman defence-works'. So he 'determined to be a medievalist'. But even as a youngster, he was 'chiefly interested in how things—primarily then medieval things—came to be where they are, or were, or took place where they did'. He was thus enthused by history and geography well before he first heard the term 'historical geography'. As a research student at Durham, Robin set out to chart the contribution of the Cistercian Order to the geography of medieval England, doing so in what he later judged to be perhaps closer to the Sauerian tradition of cultural geography at Berkeley than to the Darbian tradition of historical geography in England. He set his own work unquestioningly within the distributional or locational tradition of geography. His focused curiosity, interpreted from Sauer, was chiefly the territorial expansion and contraction of cultural artefacts and practices around perceived or postulated centres of origin, and any consequential changes in economy and society.

[9] R. A. Donkin, *Agricultural Terracing in the Aboriginal New World*, p. 134; *Spanish Red* (Philadelphia, PA, 1977), p. 3; *Manna: an Historical Geography* (The Hague, 1980), p. 116; *The Peccary* (Philadelphia, PA, 1985), p. 102.

[10] Donkin, 'A "servant of two masters"?'.

For Robin, research should be driven by questions—specifically for him questions about 'why there and why then?'. While he accepted that attempts to answer questions could lead to 'preferred procedures' for doing so, anything redolent of 'methodology' was anathema to him. Answering questions about historical and geographical distributions, he demonstrated, requires interdisciplinary enquiry. But he also concluded that what he termed 'geographical questions'—by which he meant questions about distribution or location—are being increasingly posed and pursued in other disciplines. This led him, somewhat pessimistically, to ask whether, if 'geography' as an academic discipline did not exist today, there would be a case for inventing it. Nine years after delivering the Sauer Memorial Lecture, Robin wrote to Tim Bayliss-Smith: 'No-one would now invent Geography, in practice held together by tradition, inertia and vested interests.' A week earlier he had written in exactly the same terms to Ron Johnston, a Fellow Academician, adding that 'the putative combination of interests in Geography is largely illusory'. There is also an apocryphal story that, when retiring from his university post in Cambridge, he wrote to the central administration suggesting that the Department of Geography could—perhaps should—be disbanded, with its staff distributed readily and comfortably among other departments, notably those of Earth Sciences, Economics and History.

That jaundiced view reflects the extent to which the practice of geography generally and by Robin himself had come to emphasise its systematic perspectives, so obviously shared with other disciplines, rather than its regional or area emphasis, the traditional core of geography as a distinctive discipline. By the time Robin retired in 1996, he was far from being primarily concerned with the geography of Latin America, the *raison d'être* of his being appointed to Cambridge in 1970. His increasingly sceptical view of geography also reflects and explains the extent to which he set himself aside from the academy of geographers and set himself up as an almost independent scholar working on the fringes of a number of disciplines. While he joined a number of professional societies of scholars (including the Institute of British Geographers, the Royal Geographical Society, the Society for Latin American Studies, and the Royal Anthropological Institute), he never became closely involved in their organisation or even their activities. During his half-century as a prolific scholar, Robin attended very few academic conferences, almost certainly no more than could be counted on the fingers of one hand. He declined more than one invitation to deliver a research paper to an after-dinner, college-based, seminar in historical geography that I co-organised throughout most of his time in

Cambridge. He refused, modestly but mistakenly asserting: 'No one will be interested in the esoteric work that I do.' He attended hardly any of those seminars to hear papers by others. During his almost twenty-six years as a member of staff of the Department of Geography at Cambridge, he supervised only two doctoral research students and both were, in a sense, forced upon him: one, Rodney C. Watson, having been awarded a Canada Council research studentship, came to Cambridge in 1979 to work on a Latin American topic (he never completed his doctoral dissertation, but he did publish some papers derived from his research on the historical geography of late-colonial Chiapas, Mexico); the other, Ursula H. Barrow, working on the development of small businesses in Belize, became Robin's student in January 1988 during her third year because Graham Chapman, her supervisor until then, had moved to take up a post elsewhere in Britain (she was awarded her Ph.D. in 1991 and continued her career in the diplomatic service of Belize).

Robin did not have his work followed up by a string of graduate students and nor did he undertake any collaborative work with any colleagues in Cambridge or indeed elsewhere. Nor, in his many monographs or articles, did he provide substantial critical reviews of, or commentaries upon, work by other modern scholars related to his own interests. Nor did he normally include in his monographs any acknowledgements to other scholars for information they had provided him or for the comments on his work that he had sought from them. Only in his monograph on agricultural terracing did he record his personal indebtedness to other scholars; in a few of the others he acknowledged simply technical assistance given to him by cartographers, secretaries, librarians and archivists. When Robin travelled abroad to pursue his researches, he did so alone. He liked to be independent and self-contained. He preferred to work on his own and on topics that he had decided merited his attention. He did so with a self-confidence that never mutated into arrogance. He valued highly his academic freedom and repaid the academic community with scholarship of the highest order. While preparing this memorial, one former colleague from the Department of Geography in Cambridge described him as 'a scholar's scholar, one of a kind who could not survive in the university world of today'; another, from Jesus College, described him as 'the last of the great scholars'. While those positive judgements on Robin personally are entirely appropriate, we must hope that the negative contexts in which they are set prove not to be true.

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