

## **Professor Peter Holland**

As 10<sup>th</sup> President of the New Zealand Geographical Society (2002-2006) Professor Peter Holland led the revitalisation and repositioning of the Society as a learned body. His effectiveness in overseeing transition owed much to his stature at every level in the New Zealand geographical community. It also owed a great deal to the ecology and geography of his distinguished contributions as an academic.

Peter Holland's intellectual journey has been to understand landscapes in-the-making. As a biogeographer he has spent nearly 50 years investigating landscape as a dynamic stage that offers diverse ecological and evolutionary opportunities for living things. His cumulative insights in this field have enriched and deepened New Zealand's geographic research and scholarship, and more generally, scholarship and research in New Zealand.

Studying geography at the University of Canterbury, he graduated in 1963 with an MSc with distinction. There followed two decades abroad, in Australia, Canada, Kenya and South Africa. This began with doctoral studies at the Australian National University, then a move to McGill University in Canada as an Assistant Professor and a secondment to the University of Nairobi. Conceptualising cultural landscapes as biogeographical experiments he approached the constitutive dynamics of landscape complexities from several directions – through plant ensembles, through ephemeral or transitory plants and by focusing on water stress and nutrient-poor soils. He established an international research reputation based on the use of permanent investigative site quadrats to explore complex vegetation cover. This involved the mallee in Australia, the trout lily in the eastern deciduous forest of North America, and Erica and Aloe and Euphorbia in east and south Africa. He sees his biogeographical knowledge production role in terms of parallel inquiries at three different scales: the local scale, the landform scale and the national or continental scale. By posing big and searching questions he was in fact readying himself for his later hugely important work in New Zealand

Peter was appointed to the Chair in Geography at the University of Otago in 1981. There he began to focus on the land management decisions of early European settlers with respect to existing vegetation. Blending plant ecology, historical methodologies and socio-cultural geography, he has been attempting to recreate the shift from environmental learning to environmental modification, by, to use his phrasing, worming his way

into the minds of the early European settlers in New Zealand. A succession of publications in journals (**Progress in Physical Geography**, the **New Zealand Geographer**) and in books (**Historical Atlas of New Zealand**, **Environmental History of New Zealand**, **The Natural History of Canterbury**) provide insightful understandings of human intervention in complex and dynamic biophysical processes. This passion spilled over into his wider interests – such as the co-edited book (with Ray Hargreaves) of New Zealand short stories **Duel on the Creek**. He (I'm sure he composed it) couldn't resist the sentence in the epilogue 'New Zealand landscape is a constant in the collection'. To quote from his contribution to **Changing Places in New Zealand**, 'The New Zealand environment is not a neutral resource which policy makers and investors should take for granted'. His insights have strong resonances in contemporary New Zealand.

Peter has always had an eye for the institutional landscape of geography. He is extraordinarily student centred, in teaching and supervision. He takes great pride and pleasure in this facet of his work. His lengthy terms as Associate Editor of the **Journal of Biogeography** (one of the two most cited geographical journals internationally), **Global Ecology and Biogeography** and **Biodiversity Letters** present a Herculean contribution to the development of the subject. He (with Barry Johnston) co-edited **Southern Approaches** in the mid 1980s. This work created crucial intellectual space for the New Zealand geography community at the time. As HoD of the Otago Department for 10 years he laid a foundation for others to build upon. He has served as Associate Dean of Graduate Studies in the Humanities Division from 1998 to 2004 where he has indulged his passion, looking after the welfare of graduate students. Outside the university he has given extensive service to especially the NZVCC, NZQA and the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit.

I would like to end by going to Peter's Professorial address to the 1983 New Zealand Geography conference at Canterbury University on 'Plants and lowland Canterbury landscapes'. It was a high tech show – two projectors, landscape panoramas and close ups, images of Mondrian paintings. It was also a richly reflective address. The audience was treated to the geographical imagination of Peter Holland exploring how human communities might develop landscape strategy. This was a critical eye on the work of landscape.

It is with enormous pride and pleasure that we salute Peter Holland this evening for his geographic contributions and insights. Congratulations on the award of Distinguished New Zealand Geographer.