

### Jane Mary Soons: Distinguished New Zealand Geographer

Of the many methods of geographical training I believe that, as far as the forms of the land are concerned, no method can equal the value of one in which explanation is made an essential feature along with observation, for there is no other in which so many mental faculties are exercised.

William Morris Davis (1899): The geographical cycle, *Geographical Journal* 14, 481-504.

Those words, written a century ago by the foremost geomorphologist of his day apply with particular force to Professor Jane Soons, a glacial geomorphologist whose contributions to geography in general and physical geography in particular are marked this evening by the award of the Distinguished New Zealand Geographer Medal of the New Zealand Geographical Society.

Born and raised in the United Kingdom, where she graduated BA, Diploma & Certificate in Education (University of Sheffield, 1952 & 1953) and PhD (University of Glasgow, 1958), Jane held tutorships in two British Universities (Bedford College of the University of London, 1957-59 and University College of North Staffordshire, 1959) before taking up a permanent position as Lecturer in Geography at the University of Canterbury in 1960. Although she mainly taught undergraduate and postgraduate geomorphology courses at Canterbury, she frequently gave lectures on the regional geography of Europe. Throughout her career she has been wholeheartedly committed to a subject that integrates and values its cultural and physical dimensions. In 1971 she was appointed to the second chair in Geography and became the University's first woman professor. She retired as Professor Emeritus in 1993, but remains active in research and participates in subject conferences as well as meetings of professional bodies.

Amongst the highlights of her distinguished career, Professor Soons has been successively Vice-President (1969-77), President (1977-82) and Past President (1982-87) of the International Union for Quaternary Research (INQUA), served on and convened the National Committee for Quaternary Research of the Royal Society of New Zealand (1969-87), and participated in many University, local and national committees, including the University of Canterbury Policy Committee, the Canterbury Branches of the New Zealand Geographical Society (1969-71) and the Royal Society of New Zealand (1969-75), and the RSNZ Standing Committee for the International Geosphere/Biosphere Programme. No stranger to the recognition of her peers, in 1956 she was granted a Scholarship by the British Council that enabled her to spend five months at the Institute of Applied Geomorphology of the University of Strasbourg, in 1988

the American Geographical Society awarded her the David Livingstone Centenary Medal for Southern Hemisphere research, and in 1994 she received the Silver Medal of the Royal Society of New Zealand. The citation for the Livingstone medal noted that she had "displayed a breadth of interest and contributed knowledge to our understanding of the glacial geomorphology and ecology of Quaternary landscapes surpassed by few contemporary geographers."

Known nationally and internationally for her seminal investigations into the glacial landforms of the Rakaia Valley and environmental change in New Zealand during the Quaternary, Professor Soons has made major contributions across the domain of geomorphology. In the mid-1960s she and John Rayner, a climatologist colleague at Canterbury, set up an innovative field investigation into the relations between climatic factors and soil erosion in the Canterbury High Country. It allowed them, their colleagues and postgraduate students to monitor and explain the impact of weather events on sediment production in the Chilton Valley at Cass. Her publications from that long-running project include papers in *Arctic and Alpine Research*, *Geografiska Annaler*, *International Geomorphology*, *Journal of Hydrology (NZ)*, *New Zealand Geographer*, *Permafrost and Periglacial Processes*, *Water Resources Research*, and *Zeitschrift für Geomorphologie*. The stature of those serials is indicative of the scientific importance of her research.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the atmospheric science aspects of the Chilton Valley project expanded to ensure an unusually long, detailed and highly informative record of back country weather and climate. That work spurred the first of several long and highly productive visits to the University of Canterbury by the late Professor Mel Marcus, in his day one of the greatest glacial geomorphologists in North America and a leading figure in the American Geographical Society. Professor Soons has also made major contributions to knowledge about the glacial features of the West Coast, the landforms of Canterbury, coastal features, dating systems in geomorphology, and the dynamics of the Franz Josef Glacier. Her research findings have been published in prestigious national and international earth science and geography serials, with at least four of her more than 50 peer reviewed papers appearing in the *New Zealand Geographer*. In 1992 the book she edited with Professor Michael Selby (*Landforms of New Zealand*, Longman Paul, Auckland), with contributions from 35 earth scientists in the universities, government departments and private practice, went into a second edition.

Amongst her many admired professional qualities is the ability to bring people together into productive groups. That quality was abundantly evident during the INQUA Congress held here in 1973. It was attended by representatives of many countries and put New Zealand on the map as a place where internationally significant Quaternary research had been done or was underway. The paper sessions were successful and so too were the field

excursions held before and after the Congress, each with its own guidebook. Those booklets are still valued as compendia of information about the unusually diverse environments of the New Zealand Quaternary. In 1982 her address as INQUA President for the period 1977 to 1982 was published in the *Proceedings of the Eleventh INQUA Congress* held in Moscow. It stands as an informative statement about her achievements.

Although she did not supervise an especially large number of research students - one of them, Mark Mabin worked out details of the glacial sequence in the Rangitata Valley and went on to become Dean of Science at James Cook University in Townsville - she influenced two generations of physical geographers at Canterbury by her insistence on careful observation, logical inference about cause, and precision in the presentation and interpretation of research findings. Her students remember the field trips she led where the object was not for her to set out what was then known about landform evolution - still the intellectual challenge it was to William Morris Davis and his generation of geomorphologists - but rather to point to what is not known and to encourage others to propose and evaluate possible explanations. Nor should it be forgotten that Professor Soons served as a role model for women students keen to do research and embark on careers in physical geography. For many years its only woman member of staff, she played an important role in helping all students find an intellectual home in the Department of Geography.

Jane's students and colleagues readily recall her encouragement, support, kindness, hospitality and genuine interest in their work. In 1987, when the Department of Geography at the University of Canterbury celebrated its 50th Jubilee, she compiled a booklet of recipes contributed by visitors to the Department over the years and illustrated by Tony Shatford's wry line drawings. In its own particular way it encapsulates what colleagues, research associates and students feel about Jane: admiration for the breadth of her interests and the quality of all she does, recognition of the respect and affection in which she is held by geographers and earth scientists across the world, and appreciation of the humanity that underpins her life and work.

It is fitting that the New Zealand Geographical Society should honour Emeritus Professor Jane Soons by conferring on her its most prestigious award: the Distinguished New Zealand Geographer Medal. In more than three decades of probing research she has clarified debates about the environments of and environmental change in the central South Island, published important scientific observations and interpretations in prestigious national and international serials, prepared the ground for further inquiry, and provided outstanding leadership in her research field on the national and international stages.

*Peter Holland*  
*Professor of Geography*  
*University of Otago*