

**Emeritus Professor John R. Flenley**  
**Distinguished New Zealand Geographer Award and Medal 2015**

Nominated by Manawatu Branch, cited by A/Prof Juliana Mansvelt and Professor Michael Roche, Massey University

**Citation**

Emeritus Professor Flenley has had a long and illustrious academic career spanning more than four decades. He has made significant contributions to scholarship in the field of biogeography and palynology in particular and he has continued to write and supervise after his formal retirement from Massey University in 2001.

Professor Flenley, a 1958 graduate of Cambridge University, completed a postgraduate certificate in Education, and taught biology at the prestigious Repton School in Derbyshire. While there and funded by a research grant from the Royal Society of London he undertook and published research on the vegetation history of the Island of Canna in the Inner Hebrides. This was followed by a PhD from the Australian National University where he used palynological techniques to investigate the quaternary environmental history of New Guinea. Much of the rest of his career has been spent extending the reach of his research into the tropical rain forests, the Pacific Islands and to New Zealand and in refining the palynology techniques employed during this time, culminating in the development of automated means of identifying fossil pollen grains. Automation has the potential to revolutionize the field as it will significantly alter the time spent on identifying and counting fossil pollen grains in the lab allowing more time for interpretation. Several prototype machines have been sold overseas and the development is being carried further by some of Professor Flenley's former graduate students.

After completing his PhD John returned to England, and served as a Lecturer, Senior lecturer and then Reader in Geographer at the University of Hull from 1967-89. It was during this time that he established a teaching programme in Biogeography (complete with palynology lab) and he began his long association with the *Journal of Biogeography* eventually becoming its editor, and developing the journal to become a major international source for contemporary work in the field. The journal today has an impact factor of 4.96 and is ranked 2nd of 46 physical geography journals. In Hull and later in New Zealand Professor Flenley served on many local, national and international scientific bodies and organisations, all the while continuing to research and publish as his research interests shifted from high equatorial mountains to tropical lowlands.

In 1989 he was appointed professor of Geography at Massey University, where he again developed a world class palynology laboratory and attracted a stream of students and postgraduates (who numbered more than 30 at the time of his retirement). Under his leadership the profile of physical geography was enhanced, staff research was promoted, and he successfully obtained significant amounts of contestable external funding. While continuing to focus on how plant patterns have varied and why in relation to human activity since the late Pleistocene, John also turned his attention to the

New Zealand context, making major contributions to the debate over the length of human settlement in New Zealand/Aotearoa and to the identification of New Zealand pollen types.

Few geographers have had special issues of the *New Zealand Geographer* devoted to their work, but such was the contribution of Professor Flenley to the geography discipline that volume 57 (2001, issue 2) of the *New Zealand Geographer* contained a collection of work from Professor Flenley's colleagues. His first book *The Equatorial Rain Forest – a Geological History* was a foundational volume, posing novel explanations for problems that faced palynologists at the time. His 1992 book *Easter Island, Earth Island*, and his 2003 *The Enigmas of Easter Island* written with Paul Bahn speak powerfully to the ways in which scholars might think about people and environment relations across the globe, and have been translated into several languages. More recently he has returned to other long standing research interests such the tropical rain forest in co-editing *Tropical Rainforest Responses to Climate Change* and continuing work about Easter Island.

Professor Flenley's research has often required working in challenging physical environments, involved having a detailed command of swathes of data, and required many hours of perseverance in the lab. As Nunn (2001) noted in the Festschrift Professor Flenley is an excellent scientist, basing his conclusions on the weight of careful empirical research, and demonstrating an ability to change one's thinking as new evidence emerged. His respect for and meticulous application of the scientific method, and his ability to derive insights from a diverse fields of knowledge have meant that his contribution to the discipline and beyond has been immense. It is manifest in the range of journals in which he has published even only in the last decade or so, such as *Journal of Biogeography*, *Quaternary International* (Impact factor of 2.4), *Journal of Paleolimnology* (Impact factor of 2.1), and *The Holocene* (Impact factor of 3.79). He is an authority on the environmental history of Easter Island and his Easter Island books have much cited by other scholars. His New Zealand work has also contested some of the orthodoxies surrounding the timing of the first human arrival and settlement in New Zealand. In both instances his work using palynological techniques has reached beyond the field to engage with other scholars in disciplines such as ecology and archeology.

His many international contributions have been recognized with the award of DSc (Cantab) and election to a Fellowship of the Royal Society of New Zealand.

The focus on his research contribution ought not to obscure other contributions to the teaching of geography in the university and to the New Zealand Geographical Society. On his arrival at Massey University Professor Flenley made some innovative changes to the teaching programme that involved the teaching of combined undergraduate classes. But more significantly he also ran some highly successful pedagogically challenging field course to various Pacific Islands.

He took the lead in organising a highly successful symposium on the 'History of Human Presence and Impact in the South East Asia- South Pacific', a record of which remains in the Conference Proceedings. In addition, he has served in a number of capacities on the Manawatu Branch Committee, most notably as President. He unfailingly took part in various branch activities involving school visits to the campus in explaining the mysteries of palynology to students. He has willingly reviewed books

for the *New Zealand Geographer* and put forward individuals for NZGS awards, seeing this as part of his wider responsibilities as Professor of Geography.

As former colleagues, we commend Professor John Flenley. He has always been unassuming, approachable and affable. John, was a strong supporter of both physical and human geographies, and was one of those rare geographers who easily spoke to the connection between the humans and environment, and showed a genuine interest in the research interests of departmental staff and students. An incredibly humble and sincere person, John's Christian faith guided his interactions with others, and became a means of encouraging others to consider the basis and the need for environmental ethics. He continues to serve as Deacon for the Care of Creation, with All Saints Church in Palmerston North.