

Professor Paul W. Williams
Distinguished New Zealand Geographer Award and Medal 2019

Nominated and cited by Professor Emeritus Richard Le Heron, Professor Robin Kearns, Professor Emeritus Richard Bedford, Dr Karen Fisher, Auckland Branch.

Citation

Professor Paul Williams' presented to *Dialogues in Geography in 2018* in the School of Environment, University of Auckland, on the challenges of finding a publisher for his manuscript *New Zealand Landscape: Behind the scene*. Afterwards Professor Robin Kearns remarked that Paul's talk was as crisp, concise and clear as the first-year lectures in physical geography he attended at the University of Auckland in 1978. Robin went on to say that he occasionally skipped lectures, but never Paul's. Those present at the *Dialogues* event were treated to a riveting distillation of New Zealand's geomorphological evolution, the extraordinary range of influences at play in different parts of the country and the contemporary implications of landscape evolution.

When Professor Williams was appointed Chair of Physical Geography at the University of Auckland in 1972, New Zealand geography was established as an academic discipline with strong teaching programmes but only a nascent presence in the New Zealand scientific community. He graduated from Durham, Dublin and Cambridge universities and before joining the staff at Auckland had positions at Australian National University and Trinity College Dublin. He brought to New Zealand new perspectives and field experience on the nature and significance of geographic research. An early opportunity to connect the local and the international soon occurred with the Regional International Geographical Union meeting at Massey University in 1974. The meeting showcased the stature of geography and brought to New Zealand geographers from overseas who were prominent in their fields. Paul chaired the section on Natural Environment and Human Impact and Perception. In his report to the Conference organisers he wrote of his disappointment that many at the conference expressed great surprise at there being no geomorphological field tour in a country that is regarded by many as one of the world's greatest natural geomorphological laboratories.

His career has been distinguished, carving a specialist international niche in karst geomorphology and hydrology of world renown, while synthesising the complexities of New Zealand's geomorphological setting for New Zealand. As the brief summary of highlights of his career below shows, his contributions have been wide-ranging, expending far beyond the academy.

In the 1970s and 1980s the NZGS vigorously pursued a publication agenda that sought to place New Zealand geography as a credible discipline, support the large base of geography teachers in New Zealand schools, and advance the knowledge frontiers of the country's human-environment interactions. Professor Williams was conspicuously innovative in developing a rich strand of urban geomorphological research when others were attracted to the hills. This drew on teaching and supervision interests that included a focus on Auckland's suburban expansion. Beginning with a base line study of the Wairau Creek, North Shore, Auckland (*Journal of Hydrology* (NZ) 1976) he outlined evidence from monitoring that even when residential areas had become established,

sediment yield remained unexpectedly high. He perceptively concluded that the costs of sedimentation from subdivision are being transferred to the community.

Reflections of a similar kind were elaborated on in the Anderson and Neville edited volume *The Land Our Future* (1980) in a chapter titled 'From forest to suburb: the hydrological impact of man in New Zealand'. This vein of applied geography resulted in eight technical reports for the Auckland Regional Authority on catchment planning and heavy involvement in the overview of 'what should happen' at the broad-based 1981 'Geomechanics in Urban Planning' conference in Palmerston North. Professor William's karst specialism gave him a distinctive international presence that he assiduously nurtured over half a century. Several hallmarks of this profile are especially noteworthy. He regularly extended the frontiers of karst knowledge with detailed field studies in New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Ireland and subject area reviews in a sequence of papers from the early 1970s which gradually morphed into contributions to paleoclimatology. This work centres on speleothems which contain high resolution, quantitative records of past temperatures and precipitation.

Unquestionably, Paul William cemented his international credentials in this field when he co-authored (with Derek Ford of McMaster University) *Karst Geomorphology and Hydrology* in 1989 and extensively updated *Karst Hydrology and Geomorphology* (2007). Total citations for both books exceed 5000. This was accompanied by a specialist review in the *International Journal of Speleology* (2007). Reviewers of the books were uncompromisingly flattering. Speaking of the new edition a reviewer wrote, 'Karst geoscientists will not dare to stray beyond arm's reach of this volume. It is certain to remain the professional standard for many decades.' His world standing in this field led to him being part of the UNESCO/ International Union for Conservation of Nature global review of Karst World Heritage sites. This ground-breaking study addressed the present situation, future prospects and management requirements.

In 2009 he was awarded an Honorary Fellowship of the International Association of Geomorphologists (made only every four years), the first New Zealander to receive such an award at that time and, along with another recipient, the first from the Southern Hemisphere.

In 2017 his latest book, *New Zealand Landscape* (Elsevier) was released. Richard Bedford, then President of the Royal Society, attended the launching of the book at a meeting of the New Zealand Geological Society where its publication was warmly welcomed and commended by his peers. The book, written in an accessible style, explains New Zealand through the lens of a geomorphologist. Reviewer Sam Coll observed it was surprising that we (the research community, those in policy circles, through to the interested public) have gone for so long without a new comprehensive synthesis of the geomorphology of New Zealand, the last being the Soons and Selby's *Landforms of New Zealand* (1982). A major and powerful feature of the book is how its geomorphic observations show ways to understand a host of other branches of Earth Science. This accolade is a fitting tribute to the intellectual rigour and saliency of Paul's ability to chart the contours and frontiers of a major field and geomorphic site.