
ERIC PAWSON: RESEARCH COLLABORATOR AND FACILITATOR

PETER HOLLAND

Department of Geography,
University of Otago

All who have had the privilege of collaborating on a research project with Eric Pawson will remember his ability to develop a strong argument with information gleaned from archival searches, his knowledge of the current literature, and his determination to observe the assigned word limit. He understands that research in environmental history and historical geography—the two domains in which his impact has been notable for four decades—demands special skills if the inquirer is to discriminate between interesting and essential information, and assess its importance to the topic under investigation. He is not a field or laboratory worker, and relatively little of the information for his published research comes from interviews or questionnaire surveys, but in his publications—alone or with one or several coauthors—he shows his appreciation of an earlier generation’s contributions to current understanding. He aims to involve previously unpublished diagrams, photographs, tables, and blocks of text, and draws detail from diverse domains and literatures to ensure context. He also writes clearly and avoids repetition, using informative footnotes and relevant citations to support his argument and introduce allied topics, and speaks with authority to experts in ways that individuals with a general interest in the topic will find understandable and interesting. He is investigator, explainer, and communicator rolled into one.

Eric was born, raised, and educated in England, where he investigated the early industrial history of Great Britain.¹ In 1976, when he took up his appointment at the University of Canterbury, historical geography was no longer strong, but it was revitalised through his research and that of his students. Within two years of his arrival in New Zealand he was demonstrating his grasp of the essential features of this country’s economy, environment, and society, and saw where major gaps in our knowledge of these domains lay. In recent years, he has become interested in plant conservational problems, and in threats to iconic species and ensembles of species, as well as the role of adventive plants and the visual impact of introduced species in the cultural landscapes of rural New Zealand. The breadth and depth of his interests have often allowed him to turn what might strike some as commonplace observations into probing explorations of their context in New Zealand history

¹ Eric Pawson, *The Early Industrial Revolution: Britain in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Batsford, 1979) is one of the two books that came from this line of research.

and society, which his article with Professor Paul Cloke on memorial plantings of oak trees in the Waitaki District of north Otago exemplifies.² They also fitted him for his appointment as chair of the advisory committee for the *New Zealand Historical Atlas*,³ membership of the advisory committee for the proposed online *Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, editorship of the *New Zealand Geographer*, and membership of the editorial boards of several international academic journals.

He enjoys working with graduate students, for whom he is a supportive and effective research supervisor, often joining with them to publish their research findings.⁴ He has also worked closely with colleagues and academic visitors, and the synergy has invariably been productive. In recent years, he has fostered close working relations with Professors Tom Brooking⁵ and Richard Le Heron⁶—the former a well-known New Zealand historian, and the latter a major figure in economic–social geography—and amongst the outcomes have been several major research publications. In undertaking archival research alone or with a collaborator, Eric has an intuitive understanding of what is requisite, and that sense enables him to call a halt to the search for further information when he believes that he has amassed sufficient for a strong and informative conference presentation, research publication, or public lecture. He also takes the opportunity to visit and work in archives across the world. These professional qualities make him an efficient researcher and help explain his productivity.

Eric is in much the same line as an earlier British historical geographer, Kenneth Cumberland, who also made his career in New Zealand, and many of his research topics are akin to those that Cumberland might have considered had he lived longer. He is not, however, as close to the work of Carl Sauer and the Berkeley school of historical geographers. The major differences between his and Cumberland's research are the firmer, more fully documented, foundations of Eric's work in archival research and his knowledge of a rich literature in the social sciences. I do not think that he would feel comfortable as a member of a team investigating

2 Paul Cloke and Eric Pawson, 'Memorial trees and treescape memories', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26, no. 1 (2008): 107–22, doi.org/10.1068/d79j.

3 Malcolm McKinnon, ed., *Bateman New Zealand Historical Atlas—ko papatuanuku e takato nei* (Auckland: David Bateman in association with the Historical Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1997).

4 Two examples of this from early in his career are: Eric Pawson and Geoffrey Hipkins, 'Housing renewal and the CHIP scheme in Christchurch', *New Zealand Geographer* 41 (1985): 56–63, doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-7939.1985.tb01071.x; and Eric Pawson and Neil C. Quigley, 'The Circulation of Information and Frontier Development: Canterbury 1850–1890', *New Zealand Geographer* 38, no. 2 (1982): 65–76, doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-7939.1982.tb00995.x.

5 Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking, eds., *Environmental Histories of New Zealand* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002); Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking, eds., *Seeds of Empire: The Environmental Transformation of New Zealand* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2011); Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking, eds., *Making a New Land: Environmental Histories of New Zealand* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2013).

6 Steve Britton, Richard Le Heron and Eric Pawson, eds., *Changing Places in New Zealand: A geography of restructuring* (Christchurch: New Zealand Geographical Society, 1992); Richard Le Heron and Eric Pawson, eds., *Changing Places: New Zealand in the nineties* (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1996).

topics in biogeography, boundary-layer meteorology, glacial geomorphology, or hydrology, even though he understands why such research is important. He is, however, interested in the questions that physical geographer colleagues and students investigate. Several years ago, he was invited to write a chapter for an undergraduate textbook in physical geography,⁷ and it shows his understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of modern geography.

For two decades, Eric has worked closely with large and small groups of research collaborators, investigating topics in domains ranging from historical geography and environmental history to the emergence of biological economies, the development and characteristics of intensive agriculture and its contribution to the New Zealand economy. His publications do not, however, suggest a dilettante. He has read a very large literature, and in his research he addresses a select group of current concerns thoughtfully and well. Eric also understands intuitively something that other investigators can sometimes neglect: a research project is not complete until the findings are published, a principle observed in many of the postgraduate student projects he has supervised. His skills as investigator, research coordinator, and editor came into play when he worked with Tom Brooking on a series of important books on the environmental history of New Zealand.⁸ Both were principal investigators for a large, interdisciplinary project that secured a Marsden grant. It resulted in the first edition of *Environmental Histories of New Zealand* and at least 30 books, book chapters, and articles, as well as numerous public lectures, and launched the research careers of several younger collaborators. He was later a member of another large, interdisciplinary project that secured Marsden funding to investigate emerging trends in food production in New Zealand.

Eric is a talented editor, and the books he has coordinated have benefited from his memory, eye for detail, and understanding of the topic. The new edition of *Environmental Histories of New Zealand*—a notable achievement in a country where print runs are short and only one edition is the norm—reflects his determination to recognise and foster a wide range of research expertise, particularly in younger people. His hope was that if a further edition should be contemplated then it will be coordinated and edited by a new generation of environmental historians, for this would show that environmental history and historical geography have taken root again in New Zealand universities and are thriving.

A sizeable amount of Eric's New Zealand-based research has been published in the *New Zealand Geographer*, reflecting his continuing support for the New Zealand Geographical Society and its principal publication. He recognises that New Zealand landscapes, society, economy, social features, and environmental problems have

7 A. P. Sturman and Rachel Spronken-Smith, eds., *The Physical Environment: A New Zealand perspective* (South Melbourne, Vic., and Auckland: Oxford University Press, 2001).

8 See note 5.

their roots in the mid-nineteenth century, when European settlers began to leave their mark across the New Zealand environment. To him, historical geography is more than an interesting area for study. It is also a good way to deepen citizens' understanding and perception of New Zealand environment, society, and economy.

To the best of my knowledge, in his published research Eric has not identified an abstract idea that carries his name, but in his investigations of past human activities, including their impact upon New Zealand landscapes and economy, he has shown the importance of considered, rigorous, and comprehensive research methodologies. If he has not already embarked on this, I hope that one of his retirement tasks will be to write a methodological text for historical geographers and, by extension, other human/social geographers.

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