



Members in Profile

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I am not sure if I found geography, or geography found me. I studied geography at high school in Western Australia, and loved urban geography. Unfortunately, this was a minor part of what was taught. I subsequently entered tertiary studies to complete a BA – Urban and Regional Studies, which was achieved at Curtin University, an institution from which I was awarded a degree without having attended a single day (the name change occurred in 1986-7, and we had a choice of graduating from WAIT or Curtin University). I completed a Graduate Diploma in Urban and Regional Planning and worked for a short time on social and regional planning. I was fortunate to be awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship to study a Master of Environmental Studies (MES) at York University in Toronto, Canada between 1988 and 1990. I returned to Western Australia (via a circuitous route) and worked with the state MLA for Perth, Dr. Ian Alexander (a geographer, planner and politician) before lecturing in Urban and Regional Planning at Curtin University. Despite knowing many people with geographical qualifications, geography and I still had not been formally introduced to each other.



The introduction occurred in the early 1990s, when Professor Brian McLoughlin from the University of Melbourne was on study leave at Curtin University. “Phil, I think geography is where it’s at these days,” he said on a post-lunch walk back to our respective offices. I decided to explore Brian’s suggestion, and found myself drawn to the writings of various human geographers. Simultaneously, somebody in the upper echelons of management at Bristol University decided to offer teaching fellowships for the first time, and I was soon on a plane to the south-west of England to begin studying geography with Nigel Thrift (now Sir Nigel) and Paul Cloke, along with many fantastic staff and student colleagues.

My PhD thesis eventually emerged three years later as an ecological political economy of forestry, following a tree from the Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands) to the docks at Bristol, and beyond. The geography of flows and material transformation, accompanied by an understanding of political-economy that made these flows possible, was similar to detective work. I realised at the time that this was one geographical approach. Teaching human geography (lecturing and tutoring) and human-physical geography (tutoring) at Bristol was excellent training for developing a wider appreciation of geography.

After completing my PhD I worked for two and a half very enjoyable years at the University of Newcastle, NSW, before moving to the University of Sydney in mid-1999. My experience of geography in Australia has been very positive, despite the institutional marginalisation of the discipline by many universities. Geography is generally a supportive discipline, and there are many people (too numerous to mention by name) who have been encouraging, challenging when necessary and excellent role models for me. It is a pleasure to be able to give something back and to support the next generation of geographers.

I have been President of the GSNSW since July 2014, having served on council in various positions since 2009. I was honoured to receive the Fellowship of the Society in 2013. I have also been President of the Institute of Australian Geographers (IAG) from 2012-2014, and am currently a Vice President (Immediate Past President). It has been an honour to be involved in a number of roles over many years with two excellent geographical organisations. I have been pleased to see both organisations grow stronger in recent years and to support geography and geographers through conferences, publications, websites, social media, study groups, newsletters and events for emerging geographers. The GSNSW Honours Conference is always an inspiring event to attend, and the newer GSNSW activities to promote interaction among PhD students have been very worthwhile. Similarly, the IAG Postgraduate Day preceding the annual IAG Conference is now a major event – the enthusiasm of the next generation of geographers is very heartening.

I am currently Head of School of Geosciences at the University of Sydney, and a member of the National Committee for Geographical Sciences which is working on a Strategic Directions document for geography. These, and other, roles have highlighted my concerns about the wider understanding of “geography” in our society. I recognise the need to enhance the visibility of geography within existing academic structures, and to highlight the employment prospects for geography graduates, even though their official job title will probably not be “geographer”. Our discipline is unusual in that we provide many graduates for other professions (urban planners, environmental scientists, lawyers and medical doctors come to mind from recent graduates) which means that geography is very relevant, but is often not seen by prospective undergraduate students (and their parents) as leading to a career. This needs to change.

My own research on urban and environmental geography, including human-animal relations, continues to engage my interest. I find that I am always learning – something I hope never to lose. This learning is related to the relevance of geography for the contemporary (and future) world. Geography is a discipline that seems able to contribute to most, if not all, of the “big questions” or “national priorities”, and to span the specific knowledge of many seemingly disparate disciplines. As issues evolve, geographical knowledge necessarily develops or we become redundant. This evolution sometimes creates tensions, including asking the time-honoured question of “what is geography?” I have come to view this question as a growing friendship – the geography that I was formally introduced to in the early 1990s has changed and I have played a small part in that changing, but the core of a strong friendship remains and has strengthened over the years. Geography will continue to change. This is partly what makes it so exciting.