

## DAVID ROGER OLDROYD

1936–2014



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE OLDROYD FAMILY

David Oldroyd, who died in Sydney on 7 November 2014, was a distinguished historian of geology. His works on the history of geological controversies, of geological mapping and of theories of the Earth gained him a truly international reputation and recognition including election to the Fellowship of the Geological Society of London (1993), that Society's Sue Tyler Friedman Medal (1994), and the history of geology award from the Geological Society of America (1999). He also had considerable impact during his long career in the School of History and Philosophy of Science (HPS) at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). There he trained numerous postgraduate students and taught the history of the life sciences, and the philosophy of science, with lasting effect on generations of undergraduates. Beyond this he was a man of wide interests and culture, once describing himself as 'a chemist by training, a historian of science by profession, and a musician by inclination'.

David Roger Oldroyd was born on 20 January 1936 in Luton, north of London. His father, Kenneth, was from

Huddersfield in Yorkshire, an organic chemist trained at Leeds University, who specialised in dyestuffs. During the Great Depression he moved south to a job as a dye chemist in a hat factory. Kenneth was also an amateur musician and it was through music that he met David's mother, Gladys Buckley, a piano teacher in Luton. The importance to the family of music, and of camping and walking, left-of-centre politics and 'internationalism' were to be reflected later in David's life.

David's early life was disrupted by the war. Luton was a target for German bombers and a bomb fell on the Oldroyd house one night, but failed to explode. David and his mother evacuated to the Lake District, and when she returned, homesick, to Luton, he remained in the Lakes at boarding school. David's unhappiness there saw him installed instead at a minor public school in Harpenden where he gained a good grounding in languages and mathematics, but disliked the school's religious tenor, and the inevitable wartime nationalism. Compulsory chapel provided some compensation – the choir, in which David's musical exploits began. Subsequently he attended Luton Grammar School, a precocious boy out of sympathy with the rowdy, industrial apprentices-in-the-making who formed the bulk of the student body. Kenneth was ambitious for his son to study medicine at Cambridge but David inclined more towards physics. He gained a place at Emmanuel College, Cambridge to study the natural sciences.

At Cambridge, geology and chemistry became strengths, but music was a serious distraction. David had taken up the cello in his early teens and in his later school years had the distinction of gaining admission to the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, where he met his wife-to-be, Elizabeth Jane Dawes, a doctor's daughter from Gloucestershire and an oboist. At Cambridge he plunged deeper than ever into chamber and orchestral playing. Tragedy haunted his final term at Cambridge in early 1958. David's mother was dying of lung cancer, and he sat his finals during the week after her death, not surprisingly with less than optimal results.

School teaching was David's next destination. His degree was insufficient qualification for a research career. National Service loomed, a deeply unattractive prospect to him, with exemption available by becoming a coal miner or a science teacher. He plumped for the latter!

Soon, having married Jane in September 1958, he became a chemistry teacher at John Lyon School in Harrow, and the father of two sons in rapid succession. He had his first brush with HPS at a teachers' conference in Oxford where the subject was presented as 'bridging the gap' between the 'two cultures' of the sciences and the humanities. David sought out the MSc degree in HPS taught at University College London in the evenings. He found the course rather disappointing, though a highlight was a supernumerary set of lectures by Karl Popper, material that later informed Popper's famous book *Conjectures and Refutations* (1963). With characteristic directness, David asked the great man one day whether his lecture material was itself conjectural and falsifiable. Popper was not amused.

In the midst of his HPS studies David spied an advertisement at New Zealand House in the Strand offering jobs with all fares and housing costs paid. The winter of 1961 was cold and hard, finances were not good, and an adventure was attractive. So David, Jane and their young sons sailed for New Zealand in 1962 and he began his job at Hastings Boys' High School in Hawkes Bay. It proved highly unsatisfactory, despite the splendid walking and climbing available in the beautiful local countryside, and in 1965 David obtained a far superior job as chemistry master at Christ's College in Christchurch. By now he had taken the examination for his London MSc and, in Christchurch, found the library resources needed to research the thesis topic that he had settled on: 'Geology in New Zealand Prior to 1900' (1967). During the course of this work David first combined inquiries into the history of geology with his own geological exploration on foot. Though he was happy at Christ's College, its muscular Christian ethos and a promotion bottleneck caused David to look elsewhere. He stumbled on an advertisement for a lectureship in HPS at UNSW. To his great surprise his application succeeded and so in 1969 the Oldroyds moved to Sydney.

David's serious research began with commencement of his PhD thesis at UNSW, *From Paracelsus to Haiü: The Development of Mineralogy in its Relation to Chemistry* (1974). With typical aplomb, and unusually for the time, he ensured that he met the requirement for work of publishable standard by publishing his chapters first and then submitting the thesis. His job secure, in the late 1970s and through the 1980s David engaged more fully with some of the key problems and trends of the field of history, philosophy and sociology of science more broadly conceived. He read very widely, not least for the course that he taught on the Darwinian Revolution and for his philosophy of science subject, known as the 'isms' course. The very successful texts *Darwinian Impacts* (1980) and *The Arch of Knowledge* (1986, with Spanish and Italian editions) were outcomes, and used around the world. David grappled with issues in Kuhnian and post-

Kuhnian history and philosophy of science. In a stream of papers he examined critically the debates concerning the sociology of scientific knowledge and ranged over a variety of topics in exploring these theoretical issues. A long paper published in 1987 on the contemporary controversy concerning the dating of early human remains was, I think, particularly noteworthy in working through his views: he came to accept many of the ideas that the sociologists of science drew out of their studies of controversies, but argued for a coherence theory of truth or at least of reliable knowledge. David returned to the history of geology, seeing an opportunity to make his own contribution to controversy studies. The result was *The Highlands Controversy: Constructing Geological Knowledge through Fieldwork in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1990), David's most sustained and thorough piece of archive-based, but theoretically engaged, research. In this case study he managed to combine in telling fashion his deep technical knowledge of the history of the geology of Britain, his flair for empathic research in which he literally followed in the footsteps of nineteenth-century geologists to reconstruct the dynamics of their fieldwork, and his well worked out position on the nature of scientific knowledge. The book garnered considerable praise, sealed his research reputation among the global HPS community, and contributed substantially to the award of a higher doctorate (DLitt) by UNSW.

As his reputation solidified, bringing with it promotion at UNSW to Associate Professor, (1986), then to Professor (1995), and Fellowship of the Geological Society of London (1993) and of the Australian Academy of Humanities (1994), David moved deeper into the history of geology. He retired from UNSW in 1996 but remained a very productive honorary professor. Increasingly his target audience was other historians of geology, and geological practitioners who took an interest in their subject's past. He paid less attention to the endlessly contested historiography and sociology of science. David would have been quietly pleased, if also slightly bemused, had he been able to see a geologists' 'History of Geology Group' obituary, which recently described him as 'an Australian geologist'! He had almost gone native! His research did become highly specialised, but fortunately he was still easily tempted by publishers' requests to survey broad aspects of the field, which led to important books like *Thinking About the Earth* (1996), and *Earth Cycles: A Historical Perspective* (2006). The latter began, to great effect, with a long Oldroydian disquisition on the cyclic idea embodied in the Yorkshire song 'On Ilkley Moor bah't 'at! David's eye for a good story never deserted him. Thus in *Earth, Water, Ice and Fire* (2002), his history of English Lake District geology, he not only charted in formidable detail the mastering of the rocks of that region by generations of geologists whose paths he shadowed, but he also investigated the issue of the controversial underground nuclear waste storage facility

planned for the area to deal with waste from the nuclear complex at Sellafield. With dogged insistence, charm and investigative flair, David gleefully extracted sensitive information from obscure documents, reluctant officials, and involved geologists.

David was never happier than when poring over geological maps. These were always important to him both as tools and as historical objects of study, intriguing not only because of their form and function but also for their cultural significance. They became a favourite topic in themselves during his last years. Among his final publications was a historical comparison of maps and artistic representation in the Western and Chinese traditions.

In all, David produced, or co-produced, eight books and three edited volumes, and published over 60 substantial articles and book chapters, as well as numerous other shorter pieces. He generated a flood of commentary on the history of geology, and much else, as a truly prolific essay reviewer and book reviewer. In fact, reviewing was a crucial part of David's *modus operandi*. Where others merely read to bring themselves up to speed in a new area, David tended to read and review. Sometimes he used reviews as a way of writing himself into command of unfamiliar territory. Particularly memorable in this regard was his 1987 essay review of Bruno Latour's *Science in Action* in the journal *Social Epistemology*, which elicited two published responses (and a visit to Australia) by Latour – and a reply from David!

David was devoted to the intellectual and material welfare of his many research students, especially those from overseas, China in particular. With his Chinese students he published some important contributions to the history of geology in China. He travelled extensively in the Peoples' Republic and was an honoured guest of its history of science community. Conferences and invitations took him overseas frequently: to Europe, Turkey, Russia and North America, where he gathered friends and contacts, and, always, geological information. Travel fed his deep interest in and knowledge of international affairs. He gave sterling service to a number

of institutions: as Head of the School of HPS at UNSW; as President, and earlier a very active Secretary, of the Australasian Association for the History, Philosophy and Social Studies of Science; most prominently as Secretary-General (1996–2004) and later Vice-President (2004–11) of the International Commission on the History of Geological Sciences. Within the Academy of Humanities David served a term as Chair of the History Section. He edited the journal *Earth Sciences History* almost single-handedly from 2008 until very recently, and served on many other editorial boards, including that of *Annals of Science* to which he was particularly devoted. He was further recognised by election as Corresponding Member (2002) and then full Member (2008) of the Académie Internationale d'Histoire des Sciences. David was awarded the 2014 Tom Vallance Medal by the Earth Sciences History Group of the Geological Society of Australia. Though he was too ill to receive it personally, the award was particularly fitting since Tom Vallance, then at the University of Sydney, was one of the key people to whom David turned when he arrived in Sydney, wet behind the ears as a historian of geology, in 1969.

True to his self-description, amidst all David's professional work, music was a constant preoccupation and release. He and Jane ran an orchestra for some years from their home in St Ives. David played with the Willoughby Symphony Orchestra and the Amateur Chamber Music Society of Sydney. Colleagues from the Ku-ring-gai Philharmonic Orchestra played at David's funeral. On that occasion, tributes were paid to him as a musician, an author, a teacher, an intrepid bushwalker, a devoted husband, a loving father to his sons Ben (a prominent research scientist, to David's great pride) and Nick (who, sadly, predeceased him), and a caring grandfather to Monty. He will be remembered not only as a distinguished historian but also as a gregarious and generous man. Learning of his death, a mutual friend of ours from Canada, part of David's extensive international circle of academic friends and admirers, summed him up accurately in one phrase: 'a real Mensch'.

DAVID PHILIP MILLER FAHA