

Obituary: David Christopher Thorns (1943-2020)

David Pearson



David passed away peacefully on Christmas Day 2020. He was born in a small mining village in County Durham, England into a family imbued with Methodist values. Despite, or perhaps because of these semi-rural roots, he developed a strong interest in urbanisation and social change during his social science training at Sheffield University where he graduated with a Sociology and Economics degree in 1964. This was developed further in his masters' thesis in Sociology, acquired while lecturing at Exeter University in 1967. His University of Canterbury D.Litt. based on publication (awarded in 1982) consolidated a life-long intellectual fascination with social inequality.

During his undergraduate years, he met Gloria Corrigan and they became a devoted couple closely bound by shared family and religious ideals that further influenced his longstanding concern with social inequality and his view that sociology as a discipline should display strong links between theoretical insights, empirical findings and social policy. This outlook is firmly evident in his earliest work on suburbia (Thorns, 1972), which he produced in England, and is discernible in all his subsequent research and writings in New Zealand, although his focus shifted in tune with changing academic perspectives and given his consistent inter-disciplinarity, originating from his Sheffield days (see Thorns, 2016). These influences saw him work on more expansive canvases, as his books *Fragmenting societies?* (2004) and *Place,*

identity and everyday life in a globalizing world (co-authored with geographer Harvey Perkins in 2012) clearly illustrate.

David had a facility to work with all kinds of people in various university and public service settings and his career is marked by several successful research and writing collaborations with other colleagues within and beyond sociology (myself included, with our work on social mobility and *Eclipse of Equality*). He was a prolific author with a very long list of international and local books, articles, chapters and reports to his name. Much of his wide-ranging research on housing, social and economic inequality, environmental sustainability, urban and regional development, globalisation and ageing remains highly relevant today.

This research productivity did not detract from a strong commitment to teaching and many students will recall his thoughtful, accessible and supportive instruction and supervision during his initial sojourn at the University of Auckland and many years at the University of Canterbury. He was particularly attentive to the postgraduates in his charge and several of them went on to scholarly careers. Ann Dupuis immediately comes to mind as someone who worked alongside him on jointly-published projects (see, for example, Dupuis & Thorns, 2008).

Academics who enjoy research and/or teaching are commonplace but relatively few want, let alone seek, to combine this with major administrative responsibilities. Yet David managed to achieve this. He occupied many senior administrative roles within and beyond academe. He was Head of Department at Canterbury for several years and took an active part in Tertiary Education Union affairs. His leading role in establishing the Building Research Capability in the Social Sciences Network (BRCSS) across the local social science community, membership of a National Housing Commission and work for the New Zealand Royal Society are also noteworthy. These endeavours established his reputation as a prominent New Zealand sociologist that was acknowledged internationally by, for example, the International Sociological Association and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

This impressive set of accomplishments earned him several major governmental and professional honours. A New Zealand Order of Merit, a Royal Society Fellowship, positions on UNESCO Commissions, a University of Canterbury Research Medal and an Emeritus Professorship are major examples.

These titles and awards tell their own story but it is David the person that I remember best. A curious quirk of fate led to me following him out to New Zealand the year after he arrived here in 1973. I was appointed temporarily to occupy the position he had vacated at Exeter before joining the University of Auckland department and we corresponded about the prospect of me accepting a job at Victoria University of Wellington. He met my partner and me at Auckland airport and we immediately took to him and his family. Over the years I found he was kind, fair-minded and humble but I also recall a quiet forcefulness in the way he pursued an argument or objective, and his ability to meet deadlines was sometimes unnerving.

David's research, teaching and administration always reflected his life, values and family ties. Declining health and the passing of Gloria cast a shadow over his last few years but his two daughters and their families, including four grandsons, who survive him remember a rich shared life, well-lived. I was privileged to know him.

References

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