Obituary

Richard John Chorley
1927–2002

Professor Richard Chorley died at his home in Cambridge on 12 May 2002 at the age of 74. With his passing, Cambridge geography has lost one of its most distinguished and influential scholars and geography worldwide a great advocate. His prodigious output and seminal insights made him tower over his research field, placing British geomorphology for several decades at the very centre of the world stage.¹

Dick Chorley was born on 4 September 1927 at Minehead, West Somerset. Always interested in numerical patterns, he regretted that the exigencies of summer time made him miss by a few minutes the happier numerical sequence of 3–9–27.² But the spatial dimension of his birth was a source of joy and pride and the sharply etched tectonic landforms of his childhood years probably played some part in his later interest in the study of the Earth’s surface shape and form.³ From primary school, he went on to Minehead Gramm[e]r School (always impishly mis-spelt by Chorley to tease his old English master) and thence on to national service with the Royal Engineers. He later observed that the fact that Germany surrendered between his enlistment and his arrival at training camp, counselled him against drawing hasty cause-and-effect conclusions from temporal correlation.

In 1948 Chorley went up to Exeter College to study in the School of Geography at Oxford. His period as an undergraduate there has been recalled amusingly by R.J. Beckinsale, whose iconoclastic
views influenced him greatly and whose advice was a major factor in his choosing to do graduate work in the United States. Awarded a Fulbright Scholarship, he had planned originally to work under the geomorphologist Armin K. Lobeck at Columbia University. But on arrival in New York in September 1951, Chorley found that Lobeck had been taken ill and he had perforce to turn to A.N. Strahler in the Geology Department as his research supervisor.

This twist of fate was to play a decisive role in Chorley’s career. Chorley found himself at Columbia to be part of a firecracker group of graduate students – including Stanley Schumm, Mark Melton and Marie Morisawa – all working under Strahler, who was then beginning to explore a revolutionary, quantitative approach to landform evolution. Chorley became an instructor in geology at Columbia in 1952 and then went on to a similar post at the prestigious Brown University in 1954.

Set for a North American academic career, family reasons intervened and he returned to England from the United States in 1957, first to research at Oxford and then in 1958 to a demonstratorship at Cambridge. He was never to leave ‘the other place’ and subsequently was promoted to University Lecturer (1962), Reader (1970), Professor (1974) and Emeritus Professor (1994).

Thus it was at Cambridge and not Brown that the revolutionary fuse lit by Strahler was to explode in the sixties. Rejecting the prevailing paradigm of the Davisian cycles of erosion, he sought to replace these with a quantitative model-based paradigm, with an emphasis on General Systems Theory and numerical modelling. Mathematics and modelling lay at the heart of this new geomorphology.

Cambridge already had a strong group in physical geography with J.A. Steers, W.W. Williams, B.W. Sparks and A.T. Grove. But it was Vaughan Lewis and David Stoddart among this physical group who particularly encouraged Chorley’s ideas, while Alfred Steers as an olympian Head of Department provided the benign environment in which his experiments could take place. To a prodigious output of scientific papers, Chorley was soon to add major volumes in physical geography that were to codify his approach and ask new questions about earth surface processes and the ways they can be studied. Central to these was the concept of system dynamics, and Environmental systems (with Robert Bennett) were to influence a generation of young scholars.

Chorley’s studies ranged widely from geomorphology into climatology and hydrology. He cooperated with the Colorado meteorologist, Roger Barry, on a basic text, Atmosphere, weather and climate, now in its eighth edition. He was generous in sharing his ideas, and most of the volumes were jointly authored or edited, including Water, earth and man. In this he worked with his wife, Rosemary More, encouraging her to bring her hydrological insights from work at Imperial College into his overarching systems framework.

In addition to his contemporary scientific work, Chorley launched in 1964 the first of a series of magisterial volumes on The history of the study of landforms. The project was to prove a lifelong saga. Two further volumes were published in 1973 and 1991 and at the time of Chorley’s death, Volume 4 was nearing completion. Together they form a unique and outstanding record of the evolution of geomorphology as a scientific discipline. They may well prove to be his most enduring work.

If Chorley had chosen to confine himself just to physical geography, his own research field, his influence would have been dominant. But he saw the need to widen his concern to embrace the need for change in the discipline of geography as a whole. He did this in two ways. The first was through a series of annual summer conferences for teachers held at Madingley Hall near Cambridge. The idea, hatched up at Bodie in California, following an approach from Ray Pahl, proved an immediate success and ran each July for 15 years from 1963. The lectures given each summer formed the basis of a series of volumes (notably Models in geography) which were to influence the whole discipline.

The second way of reaching out more widely was by founding, together with three Cambridge colleagues, an annual hardback series with Edward Arnold entitled, Progress in geography. This was later converted into two influential quarterly journals, in which changes over the whole discipline could be recorded and assessed. Chorley was not in favour of the physical/human split, but a survey by the publishers showed the profession to be more divided than the editors had hoped and with some regret the monistic solution was set aside. He remained on the board of Progress in physical geography for the next 27 years.
While all the above scholarly activity would secure Richard Chorley’s place in academia’s Hall of Fame, it only partly explains his huge influence. For along with his formidable scholarly equipment, he was blessed with a warmth of temperament which made him loved as well as respected. Undergraduates will remember him for outstanding teaching, a dominating classroom presence, and those embroidered stories that are still being told and retold around the world. A major lecture by Chorley caused a frisson of excitement, rather like seeing a Botham striding to the wicket: sixes struck over the establishment pavilion continued to be a hallmark of a vintage Chorley innings.

Research students now holding key chairs in Britain and overseas will recall a supervisor who encouraged them to ask new questions and allowed them to wander on the loosest of reins. He guaranteed them lifetime support. His colleagues will recall a man who was the best of company, sensitive, encouraging, occasionally outrageous, who, despite his legendary hard work, always found time to help and to explain.

Richard Chorley was proud of his college connections. He was a Fellow of Sidney Sussex for 40 years from his election in 1962 and its Vice-Master, 1990–3. Here he championed geography within the college and was responsible for a number of significant elections to fellowships. More idiosyncratic was his campaign to establish, from sources embedded in the detective stories, that Sherlock Holmes had been an undergraduate at Sidney.

But at heart he remained a West Country man, with his deep family roots in the Exmoor area, and a soft burr that a lifetime in Oxford and Cambridge never eradicated. He was proud to be a product of a local primary and secondary school, and it was typical of his loyalty that he continued to cherish and support local institutions as wide-ranging as the cider-orchard customs at Carhampton to the county cricket team. Undeterred by their inability to win the County Championship, he gave a fierce support to teams in which such characters as Harold Gimblett and Ian Botham were heroes. He was a founder investor in the West Somerset Railway, based at Bishops Lydeard, and in a last act of piety asked for any funeral tributes to go to that Society.

Although loaded with most of the honours which an academic life allows (he held high honours from professional societies on both sides of the Atlantic, an honorary degree from Bristol, and an outstanding Festschrift volume, Process and form in geomorphology, meticulously edited by his old friend David Stoddart), he was essentially a modest man. In later years he turned aside many marks of recognition which would have been eagerly grasped by most colleagues. His retirement years followed a contented pattern of cycling from Newnham to the Department for work on the latest ‘history’ volume, lunch at college, and home again for tea. North American invitations to lecture came by the score, but were gently set aside.

Rarely have such huge talents coincided with such warm good humour and such gentle self-effacement. I first met Dick in 1958 in West Somerset and we shared an enduring friendship. In 40 years of collaboration together, the only matter I can ever remember disputing with him was the order of our names on joint publications: even when he had supplied all the key ideas and carried by far the heavier load, he still wanted always to be placed last.

Richard was equally blessed in his personal as well as his public life. He had the good fortune to marry Rosemary More in 1965 and raised two children (Richard and Eleanor) of whom they were justly proud. The last time I heard him speak in public was at Dulverton on Exmoor. It was a typical bravura after-dinner performance which drew heavily on his familiar West Country store of stories, many from his Just William childhood. Typically, it reduced his audience to side-aching tears. That evening caught the spirit of a man whose whole life was marvellously suffused with what the poet John Betjeman called ‘the bonus of laughter’.

But Dick had his deeply serious side. Despite the theory and the mathematics, he found ‘the landscape in its glory’ (as John Keble put it) had theological as well as scientific meaning. One limpidly clear day in autumn of 1962, we were travelling with one of his old students down the Owens Valley in California when the view suddenly opened up. For mile after mile after mile, the eastern, faulted face of the Sierra Nevada rolled away in its majesty, 9000 feet above the valley floor. We climbed up through the sage-brush and tumbleweed on a small hill to get a still better view and then left Dick alone, moved to the edge of tears, by his contemplation of God’s handiwork. It was a handiwork (Bunyan’s ‘Shooe in the Earth’).
that Dick was to spend his whole life studying and gracefully illuminating for us.

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Notes

1 This obituary is based with permission on that written by the author for The Independent on Saturday 12 May 2002. I am grateful to many of Dick’s colleagues, both here and overseas, for recollections and suggestions. A full list of Chorley’s publications from 1956 through to 1995 is given in his festschrift volume Stoddart D R (ed.) Process and form in geomorphology Routledge, London 400–405. An updated publication list is available on the Cambridge Department of Geography web site (http://www.geog.cam.ac.uk/people/chorley).

2 Typically, he later compensated for this by observing two birthdays on successive days.

3 See the speculation in Haggett P 1997 On the landform history of Chorley’s West Somerset in Stoddart, 215–41.


5 His first brief scientific paper was Chorley R J 1954 Some neglected source material in quantitative geomorphology Journal of Geology 64 422–3. Over the following decades he was to add four score more papers published in 25 journals which ranged from U.S. Geological Survey, Professional Papers and Proceedings of the Royal Society (Series A) to Nature and Geography. The impact of his geomorphological work is assessed in Stoddart D R 1997 Richard J. Chorley and modern geomorphology in Stoddart, 383–99.


11 The fellow journal founders in the ‘gang of four’ were Christopher Board, David Stoddart and Peter Haggett. Progress in geography ran through nine volumes and its two successor volumes (Progress in physical geography and Progress in human geography) have now reached their twenty-eighth year.


13 Derek Gregory was the first of six Sidney Sussex fellows.

14 In three closely argued papers in the Sidney Sussex College Magazine.

15 The West Somerset Railway Association, The Railway Station, Bishops’ Lydeard, Taunton, Somerset TA4 3BX.

16 At a conference to mark the fortieth anniversary of Exmoor National Park held in September 1994 and organized by two of his former students now in the West Country, John Russell (Exeter) and David Rabson (Nynehead).