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Obituary

Gordon Herries Davies, 1932-2019.

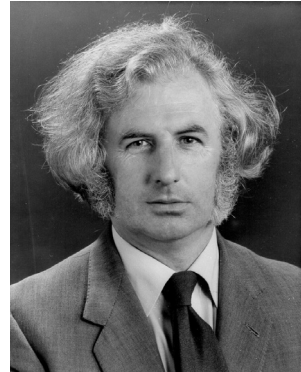
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Geographical
Society of
Ireland

An Cumann Tíreolaíochta na hÉireann

Gordon L. Herries Davies, 1932–2019



Professor Gordon Leslie Herries Davies was a distinguished member of the Department of Geography, Trinity College Dublin until his retirement in 1988. His early research was in geomorphology but his primary interest turned to the history of the geosciences, in which he became a leading authority. He changed his name, and consequently the authorship of his publications, from Davies to Herries Davies in 1978. This was to avoid confusion with a man of the same name who was appointed to the staff of Trinity College and also to continue the maiden name of his mother which was from a Scottish Herries family. He is referred to simply as Gordon in this tribute.

Gordon was born on 18th January 1932, the son of Manchester businessman Leslie Davies and his wife Kathleen. He entered the private William Hulme's Grammar School when aged almost ten. School records indicate high levels of achievement especially in history but also in geography and English literature. These were to be reflected in Gordon's later life. He was a prefect in the school. He attributed the influence of a good geography teacher as being the reason why he chose to read geography at Manchester University. He was awarded a scholarship by Manchester Education Committee to enter university in 1950.

Although the undergraduate curriculum, especially in the early stages, did not greatly stimulate Gordon, geomorphologist David Niddrie excited an interest in that branch of geography. The research for his B.A. dissertation was on the Parish of North Uist in the Scottish Outer Hebrides. A paper based on this undergraduate work was published in *The Scottish Geographical Magazine*. Having become attached to the island, he returned in later life to live there. In turn, a geoscience exhibition which opened in the island's museum two months after his death was dedicated to his memory by the local history society.

On graduation in 1953 he was awarded a scholarship and he investigated change on part of the coast of north Wales for the degree of M.A. at Manchester University. At Easter in that postgraduate year the acting head of department T. W. Freeman, who had been a geography lecturer in Trinity College Dublin from 1936 to 1949, told Gordon that there was an upcoming position there and he strongly encouraged him to apply. This he did and was duly appointed as an assistant lecturer commencing in October 1954, aged only 22.

Trinity Geography in those early days comprised only three academic staff, the others being Joe Haughton, an understanding and caring head, and historical geographer John Andrews, whose assistance with his later writing Gordon always acknowledged. Each had to teach courses outside their specialisms in order to provide full curricula for the

two streams of students in science and arts over their four-year courses. Gordon was the physical geographer, teaching geomorphology and climate, but he also had courses such as map projections, Africa, North America and introduction to geography. The appointment of other physical geographers and the growth in staff numbers enabled Gordon in later years to concentrate on the history and philosophy of geography, which became a mandatory course in the final year. He served as Head of Department in 1965–66 when Joe Haughton was in Nigeria establishing the Geography Department in the University of Lagos. Gordon wrote an excellent history of the Geography Department, tracing the evolution from the introduction to Trinity of lectures in commercial geography in 1925, through the founding of the Department as the oldest in the Republic of Ireland, until its golden anniversary in 1986 (Gordon L. Herries Davies, *This Protean Subject: the Geography Department in Trinity College Dublin 1936–1986*, Department of Geography, Trinity College Dublin, 1986, 48pp.). In it he referred to the coming of age of the Department's field programme as being in 1959 when he and Joe Haughton led a group of forty by boat, train and coach to four locations in Spain.

Approaches to former students concerning their reminiscences of 'GL' resulted in comments such as: 'he initiated my life-long interest in geomorphology', 'truly inspirational teacher', 'really interesting lectures', 'most helpful and supportive', 'infectious enthusiasm for his subject', 'great in the field', 'very approachable and friendly', 'highly stimulating and encouraging', 'a distinctive and excellent teacher', 'an outstanding mentor and tutor', 'he provided a template for my university teaching career', etc. When Gordon was on sabbatical as a visiting professor in Oregon, USA in 1967/68, he needed blood transfusions and his students there had a 'bleed-in' to avoid incurrence of the high costs of blood. He always responded fully and enthusiastically to students' questions even though, most notably with map projections, some of them might be designed to divert him from the topic of a lecture. He sometimes used ploys to attract the attention of first-year students, such as sitting in the middle of the lecture theatre as incoming students assembled for their first lecture and after some time rising to address them from there, or coming into a lecture with a large toy parrot on his shoulder. He had a wonderful ability to get students to think, sometimes making what might seem strange statements to prompt this. Gordon had a great memory of students and, on someone mentioning the name of one from the distant past, he could immediately state that student's year of graduation. He could specify 'vintage years' in which the quality and attainments of students were above average. Having been involved in the student geography society in Manchester University, he was very helpful to the students founding the Dublin University Geographical Society in 1960 and his interest and assistance continued. His participation in the DUGS included taking a party to the former Yugoslavia in 1961 and coping admirably with the difficult situation created by the theft and destruction of their minibus.

Gordon enjoyed Trinity and was very appreciative of the extent to which it provided a favourable academic environment. It facilitated his research, let him follow his interests and allowed him do what he wanted to do. The renowned college library was a particular asset in his research. He was elected to Fellowship in 1967, when he and Joe Haughton

were the first geographers to receive this recognition. He served as a very attentive tutor under the Trinity tutorial system, whereby each student is assigned to a member of staff to look after their personal interests. He was Junior and Senior Proctor, which involved presiding at degree conferring through Latin, and this appealed to his liking of ceremony. He wrote a booklet on the distinguished record of scientific investigation in Trinity intended to attract students to the science faculty, of which Geography has always been a part (Gordon L. Davies, *The Story of Science in Trinity College Dublin*, Trinity College Dublin, 1977, 24pp.). Geology is another science department, located beside Geography in the magnificent Museum Building, and Gordon valued long and close relationships he had with geologists there. Even in retirement, he regularly attended the events of the annual Trinity Monday, reflecting his continued attachment to the College.

Gordon was given the Lifetime Contribution to the Geographical Society of Ireland Award in 2015. He was active in the Society from the time of his arrival in Ireland. He gave lectures to the Society, including what were then the three mandatory addresses during his Presidency in 1960-1963. He led various field outings, the longest being as joint organiser of a field week in Killybegs, Co. Donegal in July 1962. In addition to such formal contributions, officers and committee members found as invaluable the advice which he gave willingly in relation to Society matters. Twenty of his publications were in the Society journal *Irish Geography* (excluding book reviews). The last was in 2004, it and one in 1970 being about the journal itself. Gordon was the Editor of *Irish Geography* for ten years, from 1969 to 1978. He initiated in 1976 a series of annual papers in *Irish Geography* titled *The Making of Irish Geography*. It was a disappointment to him that the series terminated after only four contributions, two of them by himself. Gordon's single greatest contribution to the Society was his organisation and editing of its golden jubilee volume (Gordon L. Herries Davies (ed.), *Irish Geography: The Geographical Society of Ireland Golden Jubilee 1934-1984*, Geographical Society of Ireland, Dublin, 1984, 300pp.). The fifteen authors reviewed different aspects of the study of the geography of Ireland over the preceding fifty years. Gordon wrote a chapter on the history of the Society and, based in part on discussions with some of the Society's longest-serving members, he recorded its earliest days, something which could never have been done later. Gordon's contribution in print to the Geographical Society of Ireland as author and editor far exceeds that of anyone else. This record may never be surpassed.

Gordon's early research in Ireland was mainly on the geomorphology of the southeast, with particular interests in denudation chronology and erosion surfaces. From the early 1960s, however, his interests began to shift towards the history of geomorphology. This may have involved both push and pull factors. Gordon felt that the trend in geomorphic research at that time was away from broad investigations of the evolution of landscapes to a narrower quantitative focus on geomorphic processes. The latter was of less interest to him. The pull towards the history of the earth sciences may possibly have been triggered by investigating the thoughts and practices of previous researchers in the areas of his own geomorphic work and by reading about early geologists. Added to this was his long-standing interest in history. His geomorphic expertise was evident, however,

in a much later and very useful book in The Geomorphology of the British Isles series co-authored with Nick Stephens of Queen's University, Belfast (G.L. Herries Davies and Nicholas Stephens, *Ireland*, Methuen, London, 1978, 262pp.). While this book dealt with the present landscape of the island and its evolution, there were numerous references to earlier researchers in the field.

Gordon's publications numbered over eighty (excluding book reviews), with papers in a wide range of journals and chapters in books, but space here permits consideration only of his books. All this work was done in his large, clear handwriting, never adapting to the use of a typewriter or computer keyboard. His first book was the classic and very successful *Earth in Decay* (Gordon L. Davies, *The Earth in Decay: A History of British Geomorphology 1578-1878*, MacDonald, London, 1969, 406pp.). One important original contribution of the book was to push back knowledge of the origins of the history of geomorphology from the late eighteenth century where it had previously been taken to lie. Gordon was awarded a PhD by Trinity for a thesis which was essentially this book. Having developed a strong interest in Sir Richard Griffith, he suggested a symposium to commemorate the centenary of his death and co-edited the proceedings with Charles Mollan of the Royal Dublin Society, with which he had considerable involvement (Gordon L. Herries Davies and R. Charles Mollan (eds.), *Richard Griffith 1784-1879*, Royal Dublin Society, 1980, 226pp.). While Griffith is best known today for the 'Griffith Valuation', much used in genealogy, he is sometimes referred to as 'the father of Irish geology' and his many varied contributions to Ireland were dealt with in the nine chapters, two by Gordon himself. Another joint publication was with Tony Orme of the University of California, Los Angeles and comprised two papers given by them there in 1984 (G. L. Herries Davies and Antony R. Orme, *Two Centuries of Earth Science 1650–1850*, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, UCLA, 1989, 101pp.). At the beginning of his lecture, Gordon had distributed to each member of the audience a pebble brought from Killiney Beach, Co. Dublin to illustrate responses at the interface between terrestrial objects and human reactions.

Gordon was author of three renowned books on geological cartography and institutions. In the first book he revealed and explored the pioneering work from 1750 when Ireland was the scene of major innovations in geological mapping that contributed to developments abroad (Gordon L. Davies, *Sheets of Many Colours: The Mapping of Ireland's Rocks 1750–1890*, Royal Dublin Society, Dublin, 1983, 256pp.). The fascinating story was continued down to the completion of the classic one-inch geological map of Ireland in 1890. Having learned much about the history of the Geological Survey of Ireland when researching that book, Gordon felt the desirability of undertaking that story for its one hundred and fiftieth anniversary, it having been founded in 1845. This necessitated state approval and finance for the Geological Survey to commission the work. The outcome was a large-format and beautifully-illustrated book (Gordon L. Herries Davies, *North from the Hook: 150 Years of the Geological Survey of Ireland*, Geological Survey of Ireland, Dublin, 1995, 353pp.). He acknowledged the assistance of the Survey's archivist Jean Archer in the preparation of these two books. The international recognition of the quality of these Irish books and his other work was demonstrated by the commissioning of Gordon to

write a history of the Geological Society of London to mark its bicentenary (Gordon L. Herries Davies, *Whatever is under the Earth: The Geological Society of London 1807 to 2007*, The Geological Society, London, 2007, 369pp.). This was a prestigious assignment as the Society is the oldest and the second largest, after its American counterpart, geological society in the world. As with the Irish Survey, the vicissitudes of the Society over the years with the effects of external influences and the roles of the many personnel involved were expertly described and analysed.

The quality of the research and writing evident in Gordon's books was regarded internationally as being of the very highest standard. Those which he himself regarded as his best were *The Earth in Decay* and the two Irish geological volumes. His meticulous research was that of a true creative independent scholar. The rigorous and painstaking depth of his investigations was reflected in his consulting for *The Earth in Decay* over one thousand pre-1808 publications and many manuscripts in ten libraries. Although based on the most thorough research, he was intent on making his books accessible to a readership much broader than the narrow specialist. This may have influenced his choice of titles for his principal books, with main titles that would attract attention and with details of the subjects and dates coverage to be found only in the subtitles. Most chapter titles consisted of the name of a theme, organised broadly chronologically, followed by the relevant dates. Gordon had an inimitable literary style in which his writing was authoritative, eloquent, informative, clear, entertaining and most readable. Events dealt with were often set in their broader extraneous scientific, political, social, institutional and other influential contexts, making them more understandable and interesting. This was done also through his painting of incisive pen-pictures of major, and some minor, players together with use of appropriate illustrations. He did not shirk from referring to shortcomings of individuals as well as to beneficial attributes. As the Director of the Geological Survey of Ireland wrote in the foreword to *North from the Hook*, "... it demonstrates that geologists are endowed with eccentricity, humour, intrigue and sadness as any other part of humanity". There was liberal use of well-chosen anecdotes and stories which, while being relevant and revealing, added lightness and some humour to the text. At times writing as if he were personally observing the characters made readers feel almost as if they were present too and he did say that there was a bit of himself in his books (not elsewhere to the extent of insertion on page 277 of *Whatever is under the Earth* of a photograph from the Geological Society's archives that, at the librarian's request, included him working in its library in 1972). The interest he had in the characters he was researching and the enjoyment he had in his work came through in the pages of his books. Instead of boring institutional histories chronicling developments over successive dates, Gordon's books read as fascinating and entertaining stories grounded in very thorough and authoritative research. He was well known amongst historians of science and the relevant international organisations. He received major awards from The Geological Society of London, The Geological Society of America and The Society for the Study of Natural History.

Gordon was elected to the Royal Irish Academy in 1979 and had substantial involvement in its affairs. He was a member of its council from 1980 to 1989 and served

as vice-president in 1981-82. He was the first chair of The National Committee for the History and Philosophy of Science from 1980 to 1991. He compiled a bibliography circulated by the RIA to all schools in the Republic of Ireland (Gordon L. Herries Davies, *The History of Irish Science: A Select Bibliography*, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 1985). He played a major role in the early development of the RIA's Dictionary of Irish Biography Project, which was officially launched in 1987. He was its first editor and he served as secretary to the organising committee from 1985 to 1991.

Gordon had very wide-ranging knowledge with many interests and involvements outside his teaching and specific academic research. From his childhood train-spotting days, he had an interest in railways. Also from very early in his life, he was interested in ships, naval history and maritime affairs; as a teenager he had seriously considered joining the Royal Navy. In recent years Gordon was writing about the First World War naval Battle of Jutland. He spent time in second-hand bookshops and accumulated a substantial library. He was interested in scientific instruments and how they evolved over time. Gordon was intent on demonstrating, wherever appropriate, the extent to which Irish science inherited a major legacy from the nineteenth century. He was involved with the Royal Zoological Society of Ireland and had written an unpublished history of it. Television involvement included participation in programmes on moon landings and contributing to a geography series for schools. While most of Gordon's research was on the history of the geosciences, he always had an interest in and concern for the general issue of geography in Ireland beyond his own geographical research. He was one of the key stalwarts who supported and contributed to the broad field of geography in Ireland in the second half of the twentieth century.

Gordon was a very impressive and exuberant person, especially as his persona evolved over the years, a larger-than-life character. His commanding presence would be felt even in a crowded room, in part because of his distinctive appearance and voice. This was reinforced on occasions when he wore period clothing. While he might have conveyed to some at first an impression of being formal and authoritative, he was very approachable, interested in people and generous in helping and encouraging others. He in turn fully acknowledged assistance and inspiration he had received but he was in some respects an independent person. It was evident that he greatly enjoyed his research and writing. Historian David Oldroyd, reviewing *North from the Hook* in *The British Journal for the History of Science*, wrote that he wished he had had the opportunity to live the life that Gordon has lived.

Having resided in urban Manchester and Dublin, in retirement Gordon moved in 1989 to Ballinlough House near Nenagh, Co. Tipperary and in 2009 to the beautiful environment of North Uist, Scotland. He was buried there following his sudden death on 22nd February 2019. Gordon is survived by his long-time companion Jean, his wife Mary, their two sons Kelvin and Lyell, Kelvin's partner Jane, and his brother Raymond.

*Desmond A. Gillmor,
Trinity College Dublin*