

Tribute to Ron Davies



(1931-2012)

IGU Urban Commission's field trip, Cape Town, 1995

An Affectionate Memoir for Professor Ronald J. Davies, 1931-2012, M.Sc. Rhodes, Ph.D. London. Professor of Geography, at University of Natal, Durban (1967) and later at the University of Cape Town

From an International Geographical Union , Urban Commission member

Wayne K. D. Davies, Emeritus Professor of Geography, University of Calgary, Canada - formerly from Wales, the land of Ron's grandfather.

It was with great sadness that I heard of the sudden death on September 13th of my good friend and colleague, Ron Davies. He was one of the most distinguished geographers of his generation in South Africa. Since his national colleagues will testify to the quality of his work in his country elsewhere, I would like to focus on some of his important contributions to the International Geographical Union's Urban Commission and also on his fascinating character.

Ron was a regular participant in our meetings in various parts of the world for over twenty years. He always presented excellent, well-researched papers and provided sharp incisive comments in the discussions on other lectures. But he also came into his own in the informal field trips in cities around the world in which we held meetings. He combined his wealth of knowledge about the morphology and growth of cities with a sharp critical eye to unravel the uniqueness of urban places. He revelled in what he called 'fossicking' around places, providing, for those of us who were privileged to be with him, unique insights into the character of cities. All of us learned so much from him. He was a fund of knowledge about cities, even when he had never previously visited the place we were in, testifying to the breadth of his reading.

All the long term members of the Commission around the world agree that the meeting he ran in Cape Town in 1995 was one of the best we have experienced, given the quality of the papers, the local field trips, discussions, and the support we received from his many colleagues. This led to his editing of a fine volume of 541 pages in the following year, based on selected papers presented at the meeting (Contemporary City Structures). It was an editorial task to which Ron brought his keen sense of style to enliven many of the papers, as well as showing his tact in convincing contributors who saw no reason to change their work, that they should do so!. But it was the long field trip that preceded the meeting that will also long live in our memories as the best ever. Starting In Johannesburg, and generously helped by two colleagues from Cape universities and his good wife Shirley, as well as being assisted by other experts in various cities we visited, we had a remarkable tour: first around the economic heartland, across the Veld, down the Drakenbergs to Durban and Hluhluwe park, then along the Garden Coast route and into the Karoos before reaching Cape Town. Ron, with his usual dedication and diligence, also wrote a lengthy field guide for us, describing the salient features of everywhere we visited - clearly a task of many weeks. All the participants have their own stories of various events on the excursion - stories that are always being retold at subsequent commission meetings. All agree it provided us with wonderful insights into the geographical character and problems of the different areas of South Africa and its major cities at a critical time in its history. With his usual modesty Ron dismissed our praise, arguing that he was simply giving back to the Commission. He claimed it was a return for the support he received from the Commission members during the apartheid years when so many people boycotted South African academics. He knew he was always welcome in the Commission and felt it provided him with an outlet to the world, instead of isolation. But there can be little doubt that despite his often expressed concern for the politics of his country he was deeply proud of his land and its many different peoples and he wanted us to understand its strengths and problems. Ron had clearly devoted months to the preparation of the excursion and the subsequent meeting. Few of us have come anywhere close to such a commitment! It was typical of his selflessness and generosity with his time. Indeed the latter can be seen by the warm welcome he always gave to many, many visitors from other universities around the world to South Africa, taking them on similarly memorable field excursions. Ron was tireless in these endeavours. Indeed, only a week before he died he was lecturing to yet another group of students, despite his long so-called 'retirement'. This clearly showed his life-long interest in, and commitment to, his field of enquiry, in addition to his willingness, and indeed passion, in communicating his knowledge.

On a personal level Ron was a caring and compassionate man. He had a remarkable ability to put people at ease, even those from the most humble of circumstances, as we saw on many a field excursion. All who knew him considered him a friend, perhaps helped by the fact that he rarely made critical remarks about others. He also frequently revealed surprising skills. For example, on another international field excursion in the low veld, he was asked to read one of H.C. Bosman's short stories to give us a flavour of South African's premier humorous story teller of rural Africaner life. Ron gave a masterful performance - especially since he read the text without practice - a performance helped by his usual fieldwork attire of long shorts, socks and bush jacket. Peering over his spectacles at his spell-bound audience, he made us believe it was Oom

Schalk himself who was addressing us! Of course, like all of us, Ron had his peculiarities, which actually were part of his charm. He did have occasional lapses in punctuality and organization, which showed they were not his strongest skills, although explained by the fact he was always over-committed or pre-occupied. Sometimes his organization had a puckish element. He once took me on a tour around the vineyards of Stellenbosch and managed to visit all the cheap plants first, so that by the time we got to the high quality places I could no longer take part in any wine tasting - to his great, and perhaps planned amusement. Yet Ron could also be surprising in his vulnerabilities, for he was often an unnecessary worrier. I frequently shared a room with him at meetings and found that the night before his paper he would always be revising the overheads for his paper with his impressive array of multi-coloured pens - even though his older versions were excellent. I regularly had to plead with him to turn out the lights. But whatever limitations he possessed were minor and never detracted from Ron's overall abilities and values: his sense of fair play; his caring nature; concern about his country; and eternal fascination with his subject. One can only conclude that Ron was a scholar from the old school, a true gentleman that we all respected, and loved.

In our 2012 meeting In Dortmund we heard that Ron had agreed to help the organisers of the next 2013 Urban Commission in South Africa. All who knew him were looking forward to meeting him again and seeing through his perceptive eyes the many recent changes that have taken place in South Africa cities. So the news of his sudden death came as a great shock and a real blow. He was irreplaceable. I can only conclude with the hopeful expression that ended most of his communications to others.

Go Well.

Go Well, Ron. You enlightened our world with your intellect, knowledge and good humour.

Wayne K. D. Davies.

Death is the only truth and inevitability of life. Ron was Grand old man!

From Geetha Reddy Anant, Professor of Geography, Centre for Indian Ocean Studies, Osmania University, Hyderabad, India.

In memory of Professor Ronald J. Davies, 1931-2012, M.Sc. Rhodes, Ph.D. London.
Professor of Geography, Universities of Natal & Cape Town

The communication of Ron's sad demise by Denise took us all by surprise. For those who have known him for long years the memories are encyclopaedic but for us who have but had few interactions the loss is greater for having had few opportunities for greater interactions and learning experiences.

One does not need many meetings and long years of interaction to understand people like Ron. He is one of the few who gave that space necessary to new entrants like me – I recollect with nostalgia the 1994 Berlin and have been looking forward to the 2013 meet. The travel in the U-bahn and S-bahn (specially the comforting words of concern when I was assaulted), the informal relaxing chatting in the evenings after the sessions endeared him to us all. The postage of the Cape Town meeting's proceedings to me was very touching – he did always spring surprises.

We from IGU/UGI Urban Commission will miss Ron's presence learned company, subtle humor, and care, even as we cherish the memories of interacting with him.

We hope that Ron, you had a fulfilling personal and professional life and are at peace in your new home!

Geetha Reddy Anant