

## Oliver Rackham, OBE, MA, PhD, FBA (1939-2015)

Professor Oliver Rackham died on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2015. In his lifetime he had produced a series of books which were outstanding for their combination of scholarship and readability, and which changed the way in which we interpret familiar landscapes in Britain, Mediterranean Europe and elsewhere. As news of his sudden death spread on the internet, it became clear that the sense of loss felt by British naturalists was shared by a wide community overseas, including many who had personal memories of this most accessible and engaging of men.

Oliver was born in Bungay, Suffolk, on 17<sup>th</sup> October 1939, the son of Geoffrey Rackham and his wife, Norah (née Wilson). He attended King Edward VI Grammar School, Norwich (now Norwich School), which lies within the cathedral close and traces its origins to a school founded in 1096 by Herbert de Losinga, first Bishop of Norwich, although it was re-founded in 1547. While he was a schoolboy Oliver's interest in natural history was stimulated by the Norfolk naturalist Ted Ellis and he would spend some weekends with Ted and his wife Phyllis at their home at Wheatfen Broad, a house with no 'mod cons' but surrounded by wildlife and now the centre of a nature reserve. He was already outstandingly able, and the Ellises were astonished by his ability to win the games they played in the evening without cheating. When he left school in 1958 Oliver entered the University of Cambridge as a scholar at Corpus Christi College. Here again he encountered an institution (founded in 1352) with a rich medieval heritage, not only of buildings but even more notably of books in the College's Parker Library. However, the culture of the two places could not have been more different. To his astonishment Oliver found that on arrival in Cambridge he had left the "oppressive" life of the schoolboy and "entered the free world. Nobody noticed, still less cared, whether I went through the motions of playing rugby on

a Thursday afternoon or not. ... An interest in fungi or medieval Latin no longer had to be cultivated secretly and alone." (Rackham in Bury & Winter, 2003: 186–191). In Corpus he found "the perfect home" where he was to remain for the rest of his life.

Oliver arrived at Cambridge intending to study physics, and it was only because it was suggested that he broaden his studies in his first year that he took a botanical course. However, he went on to specialise in botany. An undergraduate study of hybridisation between *Rumex conglomeratus* and *R. sanguineus* (Rackham, 1961) investigated a problem which still requires detailed study. In 1964 he was elected a fellow of Corpus Christi. His PhD thesis, *Transpiration, assimilation and the aerial environment* (1965) was based on physiological studies of *Impatiens parviflora*, then the Cambridge botanists' favourite experimental subject. After his PhD he worked initially as a University demonstrator in the Department of Botany but in 1968 he became co-leader of a Nuffield Foundation Applied Plant Physiology Project, which brought together the University's Departments of Agriculture and Botany, the Meteorological Office and the Plant Breeding Institute in a study of the impact of drought on barley (Rackham, 1972). With two Cambridge colleagues he edited an influential British Ecological Society symposium volume *Light as an ecological factor* (Bainbridge *et al.*, 1966) and its successor *Light as an ecological factor: II* (Evans *et al.*, 1975).

By 1975, however, Oliver's research interests had changed decisively to a study of ancient woodland. The Cambridge ecologist David Coombe had introduced him to the ancient woods of west Cambridgeshire and to the discipline of historical ecology. A pivotal moment came when Oliver consulted the Ely Coucher Book, the great survey of his diocesan estates commissioned in 1251 by Hugh de Northwold, Bishop of Ely. Here, under the

parish of 'Grantesden' [Little Gransden], is the entry "De Bosco. Est ibi vnus boscus qui vocatur heyle qui continet quat'uinginti acras ..." ["The Wood. There is there one wood which is called Heyle which contains fourscore acres ..."] (Rackham, 1975). An earlier generation of landscape ecologists, led by W.G. Hoskins, had envisaged an almost unbroken expanse of woodland covering medieval England. Here by contrast in Hayley Wood was a small wood which had persisted with the same name and much the same area since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The world of Norwich Cathedral and the Parker Library came together with that of Wheatfen Broad and the boulder-clay woods. It might not be too fanciful to suggest that the intellectual energy generated by this fusion was to fuel Oliver's subsequent career.

Oliver left the Nuffield Project in 1972 and worked as an independent scholar thereafter, sustained initially by a grant from the Natural Environment Research Council to support his woodland studies. His first book, *Hayley Wood* (1975), which Max Walters encouraged him to write, was a detailed description of a site which had been acquired as a noted Oxlip wood by the county Naturalists' Trust in 1962. This was followed shortly afterwards by *Trees and woodland in the British landscape* (1976) and his magnum opus, *Ancient woodland* (1980). *Trees and woodland* was frequently reprinted but *Ancient woodland* is perhaps less well-known than some of his other works, as it cost £50 on publication (equivalent to £225 today). *The ancient woodland of England: the woods of south-east Essex* (1986) was a detailed regional study and *The last forest* (1989) described Hatfield Forest in Essex, which he had come to realise was "the only place where one can step back into the Middle Ages to see, with only a small effort of the imagination, what a Forest looked like in use". His final books on woodland ecology were *Woodlands* (2006), the 100<sup>th</sup> volume in Collins' New Naturalist series, and *The ash tree* (2014).

In writing these books, and numerous papers on allied topics, Oliver drew on an extensive range of skills which, taken together,

amounted almost to genius. As a botanist first and foremost, he appreciated the biology of trees and herbs, their physiology and reproduction and above all the variation within and between species. His accounts of British elms (*Ulmus*) are outstanding in explaining the variation and ecology in a genus for which there is no agreed taxonomic treatment and which has therefore been neglected in recent decades by other ecologists and by most county flora writers. He had been taught at Cambridge by several mycologists, including the tree pathologist John Rishbeth, and by the bryologist Harold Whitehouse. He was a knowledgeable mycologist and, if not an expert bryologist, he was certainly bryo-friendly. Another departmental and university research interest was the interpretation of aerial photographs, and this too he absorbed into his portfolio of skills. As far as I know, none of his botanical mentors were at home in the archives, but Oliver certainly was. He tracked down relevant documents and, as a gifted linguist, he could read the medieval Latin, complete with numerous scribal abbreviations, in which so many of them were written. Another skill he developed was the identification of wood and the examination of wood and timber in ancient buildings, reading back from these timbers to the woodland management and carpentry skills which had shaped them. He was himself a keen woodworker (he converted one of the rooms in his house in Cambridge into a carpenter's workshop) and an enthusiastic member of the Conservation Corps/BTCV work parties which undertook coppicing at Hayley Wood after a coppice cycle was re-introduced there in 1964.

In building a historical picture from the varied lines of evidence which he assembled, Oliver relied on numerous detailed studies of particular places, and he stressed the individuality of ancient woods. He had a great gift for looking at evidence afresh, and for debunking the facile generalisations which had all too frequently become the accepted facts of woodland and forest history. He took a delight, too, in the foibles of human beings and he had the academic's characteristic

distrust for the pronouncements of bureaucrats, past and present. Above all, he had an intense historical imagination. I vividly remember an excursion to Gamlingay Wood, where he gathered us together on the bank of a muddy ditch which ran through the wood. His discourse then began with the words “This great ditch ....” and it was suddenly clear that to Oliver this was indeed a Great Ditch; he had in his mind’s eye the impressive construction it must have been when new and the immense labour needed to dig it, rather than the rather less impressive 20<sup>th</sup> century survival.

In 1986, with the publication of *The history of the countryside*, Oliver extended his range to take on the history of the British countryside as a whole. If *Ancient woodland* is the most deeply scholarly of his works, *The history of the countryside* is awe-inspiring for the way in which he covers a much wider field in almost as great a depth. It brought him to the notice of a wider readership than his more specialist works and it was awarded the Angel Literary Award. Ten years later, *The making of the Cretan landscape* (Rackham & Moody, 1996) extended the approach to the Mediterranean lands. Oliver had long experience of Crete. He first visited the island in 1968 as the botanist accompanying an archaeological expedition and in this work he teamed up with the Texan archaeologist Jennifer Moody. Oliver loved the Mediterranean world and tried hard to persuade David Coombe to visit Greece with him. “I couldn’t bear the thought of the food” the fastidious Coombe once told me with a shudder, whereas by contrast Jennifer Moody says that on one of their first excursions together Oliver tucked into a meal of “chicken livers, lights and unmentionables, washed it down with a large glass of Cretan brown wine” and then advised her “Jenny, if I am ever off my food don’t bother to call the doctor, call the priest!”. The history of the Mediterranean landscape was even more obscured by mythology than that of the British woods and forests, and it is the theory of the “Ruined Landscape, or Lost Eden” which is comprehensively demolished in their Cretan book and in its successor, *The nature of*

*Mediterranean Europe* (Grove & Rackham, 2001).

Two of Oliver’s later books did not cover natural history. *Treasures of silver at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge* (2002) is a detailed and remarkably readable account of the college silver. Oliver’s love of his college and its traditions shines through the work and thus his claim that Corpus possesses “the world’s most beautiful knob” was perhaps not entirely objective. It is a great pity that his death has deprived us of the study of the Trinity College silver which he had recently agreed to undertake. *Transitus Beati Fursei* (2007) was a translation from Latin of the life of an Irish missionary to East Anglia. He updated the brief history of Corpus by Bury (2002) and revised some of his own major works in his later years, including *Trees and woodlands* (new edition, 1990) and *Ancient woodland* (new edition, 2003). *The illustrated history of the countryside* (1994) had an abridged text, but numerous additional colour illustrations and maps. *The making of the Cretan landscape* was translated into Greek in 2004 and, more surprisingly, *The history of the countryside* into Japanese in 2013. As Oliver became well known and had opportunities to travel outside Europe, he brought new perspectives into his later works. Australia, for example, he regarded as “virtually a different planet” (Rackham, 2006, p. 72).

Oliver was a leading member of the first generation of modern historical ecologists. He recognised the study of the Norfolk Broads by Joyce Lambert and her colleagues (1960) as a pioneer publication, and George Peterken, Ruth Tittensor and Colin Tubbs amongst the early practitioners (Rackham, 1990, p. xiv). Oliver’s contribution was notable not only for the wide-ranging evidence he collected but also for the popular appeal of his writing. His mature style took some time to develop but by the mid-1980s his prose had become extremely entertaining without any loss of scholarly precision. His books are illustrated by numerous hand-drawn and labelled maps, plans and diagrams (calligraphy was another of his skills). Oliver’s works established the concept of ancient woodland in the public

mind and George Peterken's presence in the Nature Conservancy / Nature Conservancy Council ensured that public concern was translated into official action. Oliver lived to see the threat of coniferisation removed from the ancient woods, although he was quick to recognise that it had only been replaced by other, more insidious threats.

To the end of his life Oliver remained an accessible figure, known by first name to a multitude of people. His accessibility was enhanced by the fact that he never drove a car. In Cambridge he was always happy to join excursions which would allow him to visit, or re-visit, ancient woods, and further afield people were only too happy to show him their local sites of interest. He would talk to anyone, and if there was no-one to talk to he would happily mutter away to himself. The range of his knowledge never ceased to amaze even those friends who had known him for years. On one excursion, when the party encountered a dead Moorhen by the road, Oliver immediately provided a recipe for Moorhen pie. In Corpus he was a treasured figure, renowned for his habit of combining academical dress with his characteristic red socks and sandals. After a troubled period in the College he was elected Master for a year (2007–2008), allowing time for the Fellows to choose a long-term successor. At his funeral the College Dean of Chapel spoke of his refusal to quarrel, "he just wouldn't do it".

Oliver was in fine form when attending a bryophyte excursion to Barnwell on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2015 and a lichen meeting at Madingley Wood on 7<sup>th</sup> February. However, he had a heart attack while dining on 10<sup>th</sup> February and he died in Papworth Hospital two days later. The College chapel was packed for his magnificently staged funeral on 3<sup>rd</sup> March, with a large overflow congregation in Hall. He was buried in the chapel the following day, a privilege now reserved for former Masters of the College. A commemorative symposium will be held in August 2016.

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Oliver Rackham (right) with Thomas Pakenham, author of *Meetings with remarkable trees*, in the wood at the foot of Mullaghmore, Burren, Co. Clare, July 2011. Photo © Micheline Sheehy Skeffington.



Oliver Rackham at Bradfield Woods, West Suffolk, March 1984. Photo © Ed Tanner.