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

Professor Oliver Rackham died on 12th 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 17th 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'uiginti 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 13th 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 fanci-
ful 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 100th 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 repro-
duction and above all the variation within and
between species. His accounts of British elms
(Ulms) 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 abbre-
viation, 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 individu-
ality 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 20th 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 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 31st January 2015 and a lichen meeting at Madingley Wood on 7th February. However, he had a heart attack while dining on 10th February and he died in Papworth Hospital two days later. The College chapel was packed for his magnificently staged funeral on 3rd 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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References:


C.D. Preston

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.