Ron Johnston (1941–2020): in memoriam

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Little did we know that the session from which the following set of articles are derived, held at the Annual International Conference of the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) on 29th August 2019, was the last time that Ron Johnston would be returning to the Society, which had earlier conferred two scholarly awards on him (Murchison Award, 1985 and Victoria Medal, 1990). At that London meeting, Ron was as lively and engaging as ever, though he faced surgery to repair a knee injury soon afterwards. All went well. Beyond our session on the trajectories of *Geography and Geographers* and *Political Geography*, Ron participated in another with the Norwegian geographer (and author of another landmark textbook that has enjoyed multiple editions) Arild Holt-Jensen. This too yielded a set of exchanges

in *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift—Norwegian Journal of Geography*, where Ron reflects on (auto)biography and the history of geography (Johnston 2019).

Ron was hesitant to participate in these sessions, not entirely sure who would be interested in any more of his opinion on the past and future of geography, and we owe it in part to Peter Taylor's persuasiveness to convince him to come regardless. As regards *Geography and Geographers* and its place in contemporary geography, Ron's own words in this set speak to this hesitation. In his autobiographical article completed after the session, (Johnston 2019) Ron expressed happiness that Holt-Jensen's (2019) example made him write about his own life in reflection. Yet, here his hesitation also echoes when he lamented that (Johnston 2019, 247)" (Fig. 1)

in an era where papers submitted to geography journals are frequently returned to their authors with the criticism that they are 'under-theorised' it might be desirable for some thought to be given to how we use the available biographical material, creating wholes out of parts (just as regional geographers used to do!).

Ron passed away on May 29th 2020 after a short illness. The reflections on historical durations and moments that frame the following articles now have an added poignancy in the face of this loss. Ron came into the world at a key moment in European and—as it

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Fig. 1 Ron Johnston at the Annual International Conference of the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers), London, 29th August 2019. Photograph by Heike Jöns

would turn out—world history. As one of us has noted elsewhere:

Ron Johnston was born in the English provincial, ‘railway’ town, of Swindon, Wiltshire; just a few months after the Royal Air Force had repelled the Luftwaffe’s attempt to dominate the skies over southern England. Johnston’s subsequent scholarly trajectory took him to Manchester University (UK) at the close of the 1950s and into the early 1960s, Monash University (Australia) and Canterbury University (New Zealand) later in that decade, and then back to England in the 1970s. (Sidaway 2009, 11)

He has left us at a moment when the UK faces the challenges of Brexit and the dreadful Covid-19 pandemic. The “first wave” had just peaked there—but was not the cause of his passing. Ron’s life was indeed (to adopt the title of our framing essay in the set that follows) enclosed by “troubled times”. However, they saw a boy of modest background (he grew up in the southern England town of Swindon and went to the University of Manchester funded by a Wiltshire county scholarship) become a man whose scholarly

impacts were world-spanning—as documented in a tribute (Castree 2020) published in *Progress in Human Geography*, a journal that Ron once co-edited. *Geography and Geographers*, for example, was translated into Chinese, Japanese, Malay, Portuguese and Russian. Ron charted *and* shaped a discipline. He also served as a Vice-Chancellor at the University of Essex (1992–1995) and since the 1990s, he was involved in a series of reports and influential consultations about UK parliamentary constituency boundaries.

He was rightly sceptical about disciplinary histories focused on leading men and their deeds. Contexts and a wide range of actors instead needed to be foregrounded:

While most deceased geographers are the subject of an obituary, many are only locally published (on a university department web-site, for example) and just a small proportion of the discipline’s members are now—for understandable reasons—the subject of obituaries published in the discipline’s main journals. This sustains a ‘great man’ approach to studying geography’s history and makes less accessible, even

inaccessible, the contributions of the many others whose activities—severally as well as individually—have contributed much to the whole we are seeking to appreciate. (Johnston 2019, 246)

Indeed, we are convinced that we have added enough “theorization” to this set to make this a larger whole than just celebrating the biography of a “great man”. Yet we are happy and proud that so much of the man’s character and disciplinary concern shines through in the discussion below. Regardless, it is proper to say that Ron was a great man. Though sometimes sharp in text, he was invariably generous in personal debate. His archive of publications shall resound for decades to come, be the contexts fine, troubled, or splendid.

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