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# **North West Geography**

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## Obituary

### Nigel Lawson, 1941-2022

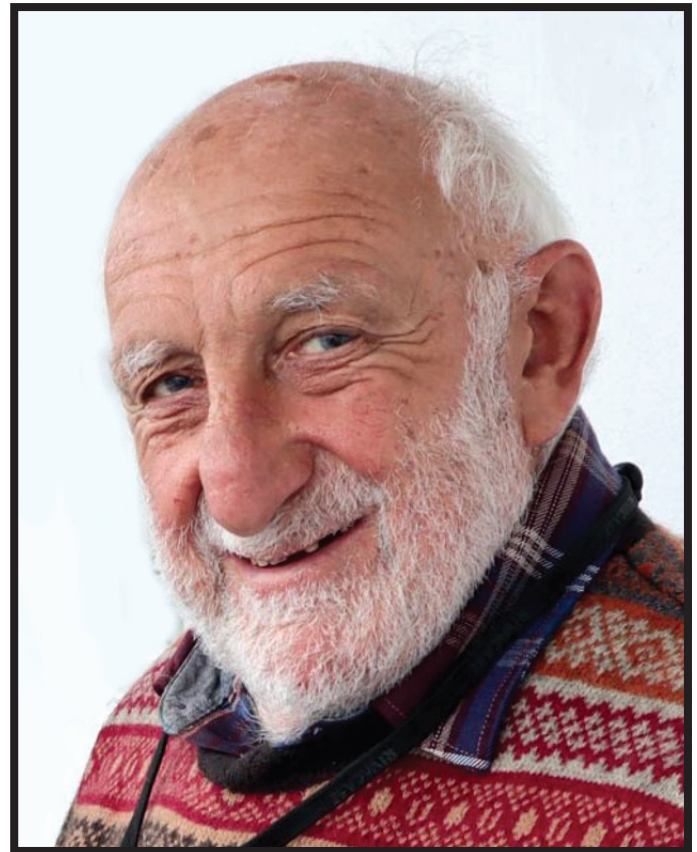
Ian Douglas

A loyal supporter and contributor to the Society's work has left us. He will be remembered by many for his lectures to the Society on his travels across Russia by the Trans-Siberian Railway and through Ukraine and the Black Sea to the Danube Delta. He also persuaded his daughter, the zoologist and tour guide Hannah Lawson, to lecture to the Society about her experiences in the Arctic, Antarctic and South America. He loved travel, the mountains and golf.

Nigel grew up in Manchester, getting to know the Cheetham Hill and Prestwich areas well, but as a teenager he spent time in Switzerland, partly to help overcome his lung condition by avoiding the then polluted Manchester air. There he became a skilled skier, later reaching national team standard and helping in creating dry ski slopes. Each winter he dashed off to the Lake District or the Cairngorms, whenever the snow was good enough for skiing. After studying textile technology and marketing at Salford Technical College (later to become part of the University of Salford), he worked in the cotton industry as a young man, travelling widely to source materials. In the early 1960s his work involved business in many countries, including visiting China which made a great impression on him.

In that decade, he married Susan and began a passion for camping holidays with his young family. He eventually set up his own business in the Wirral: *Lawson's Deep Freeze Markets*. After being highly successful for many years, competition from the major super markets forced a change. However, the years in the Wirral were formative for the family, establishing close friendships that have persisted to the present.

The change was a move to Israel to establish a restaurant business. Although this began well, difficulties arose after some years and Nigel brought the family back to Manchester where his mother lived in a flat in West Didsbury. He decided to make a step change and to enrol as a first-year student of geography in 1992, looking forward to lots of exciting fieldwork that would challenge his outdoor skills. The introductory three days in the Lake District were a delight to him, making new friends and running up Cat Bells. However, subsequently there was not enough outdoor learning. Unperturbed, he decided to spend a long vacation cycling coast to coast across the USA. The places he visited,



the people he met, and the incidents he encountered, stayed with him for the rest of his life. He frequently recalled events whenever there was a discussion about the USA.

Nigel wrote his undergraduate dissertation about the *Jewish Population of Manchester in 1881*. His detailed knowledge of Jewish migrations to Manchester and subsequent movements to outer suburbs was invaluable when later he worked on excursion guides for the Manchester Geographical Society's Exploring Greater Manchester series. He made many strong friendships with his much younger fellow students, keeping in touch with them in the 2020s.

After completing his degree, he spent a year assisting Professor Brian Robson and John McKendrick with research projects. As that came to an end in 1996, he met me by chance and told me that he was looking for something to do. I had a project with the Scientific Committee on Problems of the Environment (SCOPE) of ICSU (now the International Council for Science) and asked him to help me with collecting data on the quantity of minerals, rocks and soils people were moving about the earth for building, manufacturing, and infrastructure creation. This led to contacts with people working on Materials Flow Analysis and to varied meetings across Europe. Nigel went to one in Novgorod, Russia and met Shu-LI Huang from Taiwan, who became a lifelong friend and collaborator. This work resulted

in a significant contribution to quantifying the extent of Anthropocene, human-driven changes to the earth's surface.

The project involved meetings in different continents. For Africa, we had a meeting in Cairo. SCOPE had not had a meeting there as usually the Egyptians would not agree to providing visas for any Israeli citizen who wanted to attend the meeting. However, this one was small and Nigel went to Israel to accompany Professor Asher Schick from the University of Jerusalem to Cairo, where he was warmly welcomed at a highly productive meeting. Asher had never been to Egypt before!

From that research a new project on construction and demolition waste developed, involving partnerships with industrialists and geologists. Nigel built a lasting interaction and friendship with Stephen Garvin, then at the Building Research Establishment, that led to further projects. Nigel's golf club contacts helped in developing the external membership of the project steering committee. He kept the project moving, organising meetings and production of reports, as well carrying out much of the basic field investigation.

A second project for SCOPE involved examining the environmental impacts of peri-urban changes. Nigel helped with the data collection and co-ordination of this project while continuing to be busy with materials flow analysis. One outcome of the latter was a paper written with Rob Hodgson on "Industry, environment and health through 200 years in Manchester" that has been widely cited. A second on "The human dimensions of geomorphological work in Britain" (rejected by the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, but published in the *Journal of Industrial Ecology*) became widely cited in works on the importance on the Anthropocene for landscape transformation.

In 2000 Nigel and I became involved with the NERC Lowland Catchment Research Programme (LOCAR). Many contacts had to be made with professional and civil society organisations outside academia. We travelled across the Midlands and south of England meeting people and promoting the potential of the project to improve the management of lowland rivers. Nigel helped to organise the annual meetings of LOCAR programme researchers.

When LOCAR ended we became part of an EU COST Action programme on urban flood management (C22) led by Professor Chris Zevenbergen of UNESCO-IHE from 2005 to 2009. The COST Action programme resulted in a ERA-NET-CRUE project (2006 – 2007) that Nigel led the running on, carrying out research in Heywood, Greater Manchester and maintaining contacts with UK and European partners.

The project leader, Erik Pasche from Hamburg, became a good friend, but sadly Erik passed away relatively soon after the project ended. Nigel had, meanwhile, built a strong relationship with some Rochdale councillors and he continued working on floods and the likely impacts of climate change.

Following the COST Action Nigel was involved in the EU FP 7<sup>th</sup> Framework project (2010 – 2013) SMARTeST on innovative technology for flood resilience (*coordinator – BRE/ Stephen Garvin*). He was held in high esteem as one of the experienced and knowledgeable researchers by colleagues from across Europe.

By 2009, Nigel had become Secretary of the UK MAB Urban Forum (now the UK Urban Ecology Forum). He took up the challenge with enthusiasm, establishing good working relationship with successive Chairpersons. He also handled the extremely limited finances of the Forum, still being in post as Treasurer when he passed away. Richard Scott, the current Chairperson, wrote that Nigel was "a warm, kind and extremely supportive colleague who will be hugely missed."

This urban ecology worked brought Nigel closer to Professor John Handley and Joe Ravetz who ran the Centre for Urban and Regional Ecology at the University of Manchester. He helped with a range of projects in the centre, building on the earlier flood studies and broadening into the impacts of climate change on the urban environment. Greater Manchester was the ideal testbed and Nigel's analysis of historic extreme climate events and their impact (as recorded for example in press reports) established thresholds which could be used projecting future climate impacts. As the impacts of climate change intensify the need to adapt our communities becomes even more imperative. Nigel was above all a 'solutions driven' researcher and his work with Angela Connelly at UoM and Simon Garvin of the Building Research Establishment on how to improve resilience to flooding at the property level has influenced policy and practice in the UK and beyond. He enjoyed the challenges of the new projects and the stimulus the necessary teamwork provided and he, in turn, enthused and energised those around him. Nigel was in his element when demonstrating principle and practice in the field and he hosted a wide range of visitors, including a spring school for research students from Climate Proof Cities, the adaptation module of the Dutch government's Knowledge for Climate programme. He was a valued member of the School of Environment, Education and Development and at the time of his death Professor Sarah Lindley had just secured a continuation of his honorary research fellowship.

As paid research slowed down, Nigel sought other academic pursuits. I had long before converted that first-year field trip into an excursion guide for the Exploring Greater Manchester series, but few new guides had been added. We began with "*Rochdale Canal Walk: Two centuries of urban change*" in 2012 and produced five more, the last three concentrating on Chorlton and Didsbury. Nigel had written a draft of a walk from Didsbury to Sale Water Park, which will now be converted into the Nigel Lawson Memorial Walk along the River Mersey in South Manchester. The fieldwork for these walks was always made more fascinating by Nigel's local knowledge, not only about the Synagogues, but also about the golf clubs!

Outside the academic travel, Nigel was frequently on the move, visiting old friends and family members in Europe and North America. He and Susan went to China in 2000, walking on the Great Wall, visiting Fragrance Mountain and Xi'an, Nigel being amazed at the great changes since the 1960s. Later he travelled with a friend on the train from Chengdu to Lhasa and then into Nepal and the Everest Base camp. He remained fascinated by the mountains: one of the last books I gave him that was full of maps of the routes up the Himalayan peaks really seemed to please him. Thus, Nigel's life in the last 20 years was not just becoming a successful academic, but also replete with travel; especially to Polar regions and Russia. He had been hoping to travel over the Amur-Baikal route of the Trans-Siberian railway,

having already done the route via Mongolia. He had an Antarctic trip planned for November 2022 and was as enthusiastic about that as about going to Novgorod in 1997.

Nigel lost Susan in July 2008, after a long illness during which he cared for her with immense love and compassion. He himself had many spells in hospital and notably reduced lung capacity, but nothing diluted his willingness to help others. For example, when he was a student in 1994, he helped with the Manchester Global Forum Academic Conference, once taking a lady from Papua New Guinea to buy shoes, as her flimsy tropical sandals were totally unsuitable for the Manchester environment. His consistent readiness to assist, and his selfless helping of others were an example to us all.

He was a geographer because he loved the land and all its diversity. He never stopped, despite all his medical problems. We shall miss his enthusiasm, kindness, thoughtfulness, generosity, and his enjoyment of whisky. He has left us too soon.

*Ian Douglas*  
*28 August 2022*

I thank Daniel Lawson, Jessica Lawson, Maureen Douglas, Joanne Tippett, John Handley and Stephen Garvin for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this obituary.

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### **Outreach Publications for the General Reader**

- Lawson, N.** (2016) Construction and demolition waste. *Human Ecology Journal* (Commonwealth Human Ecology Council), 27: 7-11.
- Lawson, N.** (2021) Litter, fly tipping and illegal dumping. *Human Ecology Journal* (Commonwealth Human Ecology Council), 31: 16-20.

### **Contributions to the Manchester Geographical Society's Exploring Great Manchester Series**

(Available at: <https://www.mangeogsoc.org.uk/publications/exploring-greater-manchester/>)

- Douglas, I. and **Lawson, N.** (2012) *Rochdale Canal Walk: Two centuries of urban change*.
- Connelly, A., Douglas, I., Douglas, M. and **Lawson, N.** (2015) *Changing landscapes of places of worship in Manchester city centre: how religious buildings have left a legacy in the modern city*.
- Douglas, I., Douglas, M. and **Lawson, N.** (2016) *Changing landscapes of an inner-city street: illustrating Manchester's multi-ethnic legacies and current diversity*.
- Douglas, I., Douglas, M. and **Lawson, N.** (2019) *Discovering history, spiritual peace and tranquillity in Didsbury: West Didsbury and Albert Park*.
- Douglas, I., Douglas, M., **Lawson, N.**, Sutton, K.† and Andrew Simpson, A. (2020) *Chorlton-cum-Hardy: From village to lively, diverse suburban centre in 150 years. The Keith Sutton Memorial Walk*.
- Douglas, I., Douglas, M. and **Lawson, N.** (2020) *Discovering history and conservation in Didsbury: East Didsbury, Didsbury St. James Conservation Area*.
- Lawson, N.**, Scarle, N., Douglas, I. and Douglas, M. (forthcoming: under revision) *Didsbury to Chorlton Water Park and Jackson's Boat: transformed landscapes in an urban green/blue corridor*. (To become the *Nigel Lawson Memorial Walk*).