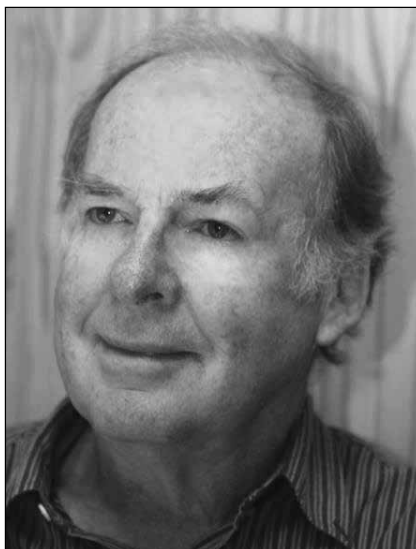


Robert Arthur Preston-Whyte (1939–2015)

ROBERT Preston-Whyte was Emeritus Professor of the previous School of Environmental Sciences at the University of Natal. Born in the Midlands of KwaZulu-Natal, it is fitting that Rob lived out his life after his retirement on his smallholding in Nottingham Road. Here he and his wife, Merle Holden, were able to explore their many interests and find peace and happiness.

Rob was a true product of the former University of Natal, completing all his undergraduate studies and Honours degree on the Pietermaritzburg campus and spending most of his working life in the Geography and Environmental Science Department on the Howard College campus, except for a brief stint at the CSIR in Pretoria.

Rob was a true scholar and intellectual. He was widely read, being equally comfortable discussing English literature or meteorological theory. His greatest scientific contribution was to our understanding of the local air circulations of KwaZulu-Natal. Appointed a lecturer at the University of Natal, Durban, at the early age of 25, he undertook his doctoral research focusing on coastal winds. He gathered his data the hard way – many days and nights spent tracking pilot balloons with a theodolite – but was ultimately able to establish the characteristics and mechanisms of the land and sea breezes and topographically-induced winds in KZN. This knowledge has contributed to our understanding of local pollution transport, occurrence of coastal rainfall, and the initiation and passage of thunderstorms across KZN, amongst other meteorological patterns.



Robert Preston-White

Geographers of the time will remember his vision, prescience and astute academic management when, as Professor and Head of Department in the 1970s and 80s, he successfully shifted the ethos of his department. It moved from one of dry, antiquated academia to that of a teaching and research institution that not only created the intellectual challenges of theory and debate, but engaged in strong teaching and research into elements of Physical and Human Geography that had immediate impact on the daily life of communities.

During the eighties and nineties he became convinced that the discipline of geography, through its inclusiveness and its strong natural and social science foundations, should become a scientific and academic leader in the wave of environmental concern sweeping the world. He soon recognised that accurate maps and global scale environmental monitoring would be essential to successful environmental management,

and he brought in the skills necessary for developing a strong teaching and research programme in the burgeoning geographic fields of Information Systems and Remote Sensing.

These monumental shifts in approach increased the stature and reputation of Geography as a discipline, and built student demand for the subject hugely, especially at the post-graduate level. The department was now producing not only teachers, but also future academics and young professionals who would find their place in career positions in commerce and industry in South Africa and beyond.

In the latter years of his academic career, Rob shifted his interests to tourism geography, writing creatively about liminal spaces on the Durban coastline. This reflected his exceptional ability to produce internationally recognised research within both the physical and social sciences. As such, he was a true geographer. However, it was his early work in climatology that made its mark and that led to a landmark text book, written with his close colleague Peter Tyson, that remains prescribed reading for students across South Africa and beyond.

In the broader university community Rob will be remembered for his 10 years spent as Dean of Social Sciences. During his period of office he brought the faculty to a position of leadership within the University – at one point its publication to staff ratio was the best in the whole institution, this notwith-

standing his constant battles with higher administration for a fairer division of resources and his intense dislike of the political machinations at that stage current in university politics in general.

It is typical of the man that after his retirement in 2004 he was able to reinvent himself. He returned to his roots in the Natal Midlands. His almost endless, inspirational energy was expended not on academic battles any longer, but in developing his smallholding in an environmentally consistent manner. His horses, golf, and clay pigeon shooting intertwined with creative writing, and before his death he had already published four novels.

Rob was in his element on geography field trips, when he was able to enthusiastically impart to students his wide general knowledge about the fauna and flora, stratigraphy, local climate and local community. Generations of students will recall trying to keep up with him as he strode up mountains at a pace that few could match. Always young and fit for his age, his untimely and sudden death from melanoma cancer is a shock to all of us. Rob was a visionary, an exceptional leader, an inspiring intellectual and a true friend. What a privilege it was to know, work with and be taught by such a passionate, inspirational and committed individual.

ROSEANNE DIAB,
GERRY GARLAND and
CATHERINE SUTHERLAND