

Obituary: William Robert Catton, Jr. 1926-2015

Colin Goodrich, Rosemary Du Plessis and Riley E. Dunlap

Bill Catton died suddenly on January 5th 2015 in Port Chalmers, New Zealand where he was staying with family who had gathered for a family wedding. Bill is survived by Nancy, his wife of 66 years and his sister, Ruth Willard Catton, both of whom were with him when he died. He is also survived by sons Stephen, Philip, Theodore and Jonathan, and by grandchildren Felicity, William, Walter, Eleanor, Benjamin and Eli, and by great-grandsons Sebastian and Alexander.

Bill was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota on January 15, 1926. At seventeen years of age he enlisted in the US Navy and served there from 1943 to 1946. He was wounded in Pacific combat aboard USS Ticonderoga and when recovered, served in the official occupation of Japan. En route home from the war he suffered the crushing of his pelvis by equipment failure aboard ship. His injury would prevent him from ever running so that during his convalescence Bill resolved that his lifetime goal for recreation would be wilderness backpacking and camping. These pursuits became legion with him and he generously shared with others this passion. As his children acknowledge, wilderness hiking became significantly defining of both his marriage and his family.

After his military service he enrolled at Oberlin College, Ohio where he met Nancy Lewis, his wife to be. They were married while still at Oberlin and soon thereafter moved to what was to be one of the great loves of his life, the United States Pacific Northwest. Bill did his Masters and PhD at the University of Washington where George Lundberg helped lead his doctoral committee.

Bill started his professional career as a mainstream sociologist without a special focus on environmental issues. However, in the course of his early research he worked with John Hendee, then a USFS forest ranger who later became Professor of Resource Recreation and Tourism and Director, University of Idaho Wilderness Research Centre at the University of Idaho, Moscow, and Frank Brockman, a National Parks naturalist who became Professor of Forestry at the University of Washington. His association with these men guided his

thinking into ecological and environmental concepts that he had not previously considered part of his sociological kitbag. In addition, the 'neo-positivist' influence of Lundberg is clearly evident in his early work. His dissatisfaction with the growing qualitative slant in sociology and his growing concern for the health of environment and the detrimental impacts that over usage had were important factors leading him towards wanting to devise more quantitative understandings of the relationship between people and the natural environment. Within this he was strongly influenced by the work of population ecologists and biologists who saw increasing incompatibility and tensions between growing populations and (more or less) finite resource bases. In short he was severely challenged by the Western view that 'growth is good'.

Bill's broad aim to make sociology more scientific, more 'real'-world and objectively based became more specifically an aim to increase in the discipline of sociology the understanding of the biogeochemical processes associated with the environment. His increasing concern with the lack of consideration of environmental factors was already manifest in his published work in the early 1970s but is perhaps best seen as coming to fruition with three publications at the end of the 1970s. Two he published jointly with Riley Dunlap, the first entitled 'Environmental Sociology: A New Paradigm,' (1978), the second, 'Environmental Sociology: A Framework for Analysis,' (1979). His magnum opus on this elaboration of both his broad and specific aims was the publication of what he regarded as his most important work, *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change*, (1980). Bill actually started writing *Overshoot* as early as 1972 and finished it during 1977-78. He had considerable trouble finding a publisher, as those initially approached considered the ecology field saturated. They failed to see the significance of this original contribution, something that was not lost on a receptive audience. It has since been published into Russian and Spanish and continues in print to this day, a rare feat indeed for a publication in the social sciences. Interestingly, Mathias Wackernagel, the scholar who gave the world the concept 'the environmental footprint' stated that the major stimulus for his development of such came from his reading of *Overshoot*.

It can fairly be said that it was the flurry of publications by Bill and Riley Dunlap around the end of the 1970s that provided the firm base to which the developing sub-discipline of environmental sociology was to anchor itself.

The publication of *Overshoot* was important but it did not mark the end of Bill's contribution to both the broader field of sociology and the sub discipline he helped make 'respectable'. He maintained his writing and public speaking (often reluctantly) well after his 'official' retirement at the end of the last Millennium and this continued through to the last few years of his life.

Below are two short essays by scholars whose lives were significantly impacted by their association with Bill.

Encountering Professor Bill Catton – Encountering Sociology

Rosemary Du Plessis

Professor Bill Catton was one of my first sociology teachers. A South African with an honours degree in social anthropology, I was generously admitted to the first year of a Master of Arts degree in sociology at University of Canterbury in 1972, and introduced to the discipline by Peter Davis, Peggy Koopman-Boyden, Bob Gidlow, Richard Thompson and Bill Catton, who was then Professor of Sociology within the Department of Psychology and Sociology. Sociology was located in the Boys' High Building on the old University of Canterbury site, now the Arts Centre of Christchurch - Te Matatiki Toi Ora. The entrance to the building was dominated by a large foyer and a magnificent marble tiled staircase with impressive wooden handrails. Psychology administration was downstairs on the lower, grander floor. Sociology administration and staff offices were upstairs, some classes were held in teaching rooms, others in the offices of academics. The building is currently being restored after the 2010 and 2011 Canterbury quakes and will reopen in late 2016.

Bill Catton's MA course focused on Social Change and used Everett Rogers' *Diffusion of Innovations* to stimulate our thinking about processes of social change, particularly changes across cultures in new ideas and technologies. Rogers' book, first published in 1962, is now in its fifth edition. Until that time, my interest in social change had been very focused on the political context with which I was most familiar, South Africa, its particular history of European colonisation and its impact on the lives of majority 'non-white' South Africans. I had grown up in a South Africa shaped by Dutch and then British colonisation, the struggles of Boer settlers against the British, and the post-World War 2 elaboration and institutionalisation of racism through the apartheid system. I was interested in how social and political change could occur in South Africa - in social movements, political organisations, and

debates about the relative morality and effectiveness of protest, parliamentary politics, underground political activism, international boycott campaigns and armed struggle. In Bill Catton's seminar I was introduced to a different set of social change agendas, less emotionally charged, more abstract, but no less politically significant. These were agendas that connected people, social systems, cultures, new ideas, the physical environment and technological innovation. These agendas related closely to the core of my professor's passions and deep interests – the impact of humans on the physical environment of our planet and the need to examine the intersection of people, natural environments and technologies. I still think of Rogers' categories of early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards when I reflect on my uptake of new digital communication technologies and my challenges in early 1970s to generate cards using the clunky, rattling key punch machine to process data using SPSS – the then amazing new and innovative Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.

As someone in their early 20s, living in a new country, encountering new and old political agendas, studying and a young parent, I was keen to soak up a range of ways of understanding, researching, and posing questions about social worlds, communities, and social change. Inevitably I brought my own life experience and political concerns to what I learnt during the papers year of my Master's degree, but I was also stretched to think in global and strategic terms about issues that had been eclipsed by attention to racism and the possibility of political change in South Africa. Bill Catton's course was a weekly opportunity to do that stretching. As I remember it, there were five of us in the class, arrayed on chairs before the large desk in his office, subject to his lively, attentive gaze as he posed questions relating to the reading for that week. These seminars would begin with some introductory comments, agenda setting and question posing by the professor, followed by encouragement for us as students to discuss what we had read and its potential application. In some ways it was the classic model of an Oxbridge tutorial – we were expected to read and think before the class, and were then put through our paces during the two hour meeting. Bill Catton's off the cuff, improvised reflections on the complexity of social change and his responses to questions were amazingly articulate. I can remember thinking "This man talks in paragraphs!" and wondering whether I could ever emulate his apparently effortless flow of words.

The classes with him kept us on our toes. Having recently completed extramural graduate study in social anthropology, the opportunities for face-to-

face interaction with teachers and students was exciting. It was an important component of a crucial year in my life that set me up for a long term career as a sociologist.

During 1972 family demands took Bill Catton back to the USA. He returned to University of Canterbury, completed the seminar programme with us, helped us to define and develop individual projects, encouraged us along the way, and then resumed his professional life in the USA. My later connections with Philip and Judith Catton meant that I met him now and then on his visits back to Aotearoa New Zealand. On each of these occasions, I enjoyed again this lively minded, questioning, dignified, critical thinker who pushed, prodded and stretched me as a graduate student. By then I had acquired a greater interest in the intersection of social worlds, politics and technologies, via a different route than *The Diffusion of Innovation*, but nevertheless vitally connected to the large scale, macro analytic agendas I had encountered in his Social Change course many years before.

Tribute to William R. Catton, Jr.

*Riley E. Dunlap*¹

Crossing paths with Bill Catton had a profoundly positive impact on my career. I was a second-year assistant professor at Washington State University when Bill joined the department in 1973, after this three-year stint in New Zealand and a semester at the University of Wyoming, and will be forever grateful that that we both ended up at WSU.

Like Bill, I was already strongly interested in environmental issues when we met, and eager to have a new colleague who shared this interest. Our foci were quite different in those days, but we began to talk and within a couple of years were regularly exchanging ideas. The momentum picked up when people began talking about a field of “environmental sociology,” something I was eager to help launch (Dunlap, 2008). At first Bill was a bit sceptical about the need for a new field, hoping to get human ecology “back on the right track” as he put it. But after being elected the inaugural Chair of the American Sociological Association’s new Section on Environmental Sociology in 1976, and realizing that sociological human ecologists were disinterested in

¹ Riley Dunlap is Regents Professor of Sociology and Laurence L. and Georgia Ina Dresser Professor at Oklahoma State University

environmental degradation, his commitment to the new field was firmly planted (Catton 2008).

We then embarked on a fruitful collaboration that yielded four articles and a book chapter over a five-year period, publications that are widely viewed as providing an intellectual foundation for the field of environmental sociology (Freudenburg and Gramling, 1989; York, 2008). We each, of course, published on our own as well, with Bill putting out a spate of articles applying insights from general ecology to contemporary human societies, as well as his masterwork, *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change* (Catton 1980). I always describe *Overshoot* as a superb ecological history of *Homo sapiens* and analysis of our evolution into what Bill called *Homo colossus*, yielding a profound understanding of our current ecological dilemma.

The importance of *Overshoot* is signified by the fact that it remains in print, still available from the University of Illinois Press after three dozen years—a rare accomplishment for a scholarly volume. Yet, it has received an interesting reception. To be honest, it is a bit “too ecological” for many sociologists, and has never received the recognition it deserved within our discipline, although environmental sociologists have certainly acknowledged its importance (Freudenburg, 2009; Shultz and York, 2011). However, it has had a huge impact outside of sociology, not only across many disciplines but in society at large, gaining Bill many fans and quite a following as apparent from an excellent website dedicated to his memory and work, where one can find several videos of interviews with Bill as well as reviews of his work and tributes from a wide range of scholars: <http://thegreatstory.org/william-catton.html>

All told, Bill Catton has left behind a highly significant intellectual legacy, helping build the now vibrant field of environmental sociology and providing one of the major voices noting the increasingly precarious ecological situation facing modern industrial societies. His message will continue to be heard and, I can only hope, be taken to heart by more and more people.

What made Bill such a great colleague is that he was also a wonderful human being as well as a fine scholar. Anyone who met him personally knows that Bill was an incredibly warm, modest and generous person. As an example of his generosity, early in my career I was surprised to hear my department Chair say something like “I understand you did a very good job at the ASA [American Sociological Association] meeting,” which surprised me because he wasn’t prone to compliments and had not attended the conference. Only later

did I discover that Bill, after attending my presentations, had written a very nice memo to our Chair describing my talks and indicating that I had been “a fine advertisement for WSU.” Having this in my file when I went up for tenure was no doubt helpful, and the experience was a valuable tutorial concerning how senior scholars can assist younger colleagues.

I also valued and learned from Bill’s ability to function professionally in the sometimes contentious world of academia, especially departmental politics. He was a calming voice in faculty meetings, and always seemed to see the best in colleagues. I do not need the fingers on one hand to count the number of times I heard him make a negative remark about a colleague, as it took a lot to annoy Bill (well, maybe only a moderate amount of pomposity, which he disdained). The old, and admittedly now outdated phrase “gentleman and scholar” comes readily to mind, for Bill was a fine scholar and a very gentle human being.

Our paths crossing at WSU forever altered my career, and I am grateful beyond words for having had the opportunity to collaborate with Bill Catton. I learned a great deal from him, including the value of collegial disagreements when we sometimes struggled to come up with a mutually agreeable final draft. Bill had a very positive impact on my career and life more generally, as he did on so many others. I treasure our collaboration and friendship, and trust that his insights will continue to broaden the vision of generations to come.

In Sum

Colin Goodrich

Bill was always a reluctant manager/administrator, ever having a healthy suspicion of those who engaged in such endeavours. When he came to Canterbury he was appointed at the Readership level but the then Head of the Department of Psychology, Professor Crowther exerted considerable pressure on Bill to accept the unfilled chair in sociology. Bill resisted for some time but eventually did take it with certain conditions attached. One of these conditions was that the University of Canterbury would fund all members of the academic staff to attend the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association that was being held in Hawaii the following year. A second bargaining chip was a sizable amount of money being made available for purchases to the sociology library collection. The University obliged on both counts. Today, such negotiations would more likely revolve around salary level and ‘special’

conditions of appointment. Not so with Bill who ensured that others benefitted from his reluctant acceptance of the chair.

Bill amassed many awards and honours during his career. Some of the most notable are:

- 1983, Fellow of the Institute for Human Ecology
- 1985, Distinguished Scholarship Award, Pacific Sociological Association
- 1985, Award of merit, Natural Resources Research Group, Rural Sociological Society (co-recipient with Riley E. Dunlap)
- 1986 Award for Distinguished Contribution, Section on Environmental Sociology, American Sociological Association (co-recipient with Riley E. Dunlap)
- 1989, Distinguished Achievement Award, College of Sciences and Arts, Washington State University

At the time of his death Bill was Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Washington State University.

The overwhelming image that one gets of Bill Catton is that of a wonderful teacher, an excellent researcher and scholar and a thoroughly decent chap with a genuine love of family, friends and the great outdoors, an individual who was unstintingly generous with his time and advice and always able to see something positive in one's silliest contribution. It was Bill who allowed me to save many a student's bacon by proffering the aphorism that he once used to assuage my own embarrassment, 'there is no such thing as a bad question, there are only bad answers.' He was a totally unassuming giant in his field and we in New Zealand were fortunate indeed to have him share part of his life with us.

In response to the questions: 'is sociology in a better state because of Bill's contribution and is the world a better place for Bill being here? The answer to both is a resounding **YES**.

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