

Obituary

OSKAR HERMANN KHRISTIAN SPATE 1911–2000

A great geographer of the twentieth century, Oskar Spate, died in Canberra on 29 May 2000. He retired as Professor in the Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, in December 1976. But in 'retirement' he undertook his greatest work – the 'magisterial' and award-winning trilogy: *The Pacific Since Magellan*. *The Spanish Lake* was published in 1979; *Monopolists and Freebooters* in 1983; and *Paradise Found and Lost* in 1988. These volumes are beautifully integrated studies in Geography, History, and Literature – a masterly fusion of Oskar's three great academic loves.

Born in London, he lived with his parents in Bloomsbury and on the Weald's northern edge. During World War I his German father was interned and he and his mother lived in Iowa. At Cambridge he gained a First in Geography and English and was attracted by Marxism. South-east of Cambridge a favourite place nurtured his sense of time in space. Where the Anglo-Saxon Fleam Dyke intersects the Neolithic Icknield Way, a Roman road, and an abandoned 1840's railway embankment, he found a time depth in landscape that intrigued him.

After completing his PhD thesis, *London 1801–1851: a geographical study*, and a temporary lectureship at Reading, he went to the University of Rangoon, where Debenham hoped he 'might mellow into a Tory'. He did not. He published papers on Burma before being conscripted into the Burma Volunteer Force as a subaltern in anti-aircraft artillery. Severely wounded in the first air raid on Rangoon, he was evacuated to India and served in the unlikely role of censor. Later, in the Inter-Service Topographical Department, he gained deep knowledge of India, and learned Portuguese from a Goanese teacher. Portuguese literature and poetry became a lifelong interest and field of publication.

After the war, Spate held posts at Bedford College, London and the London School of Economics where he became Reader and, with W.G. East, edited *The Changing Map of Asia*. Before the partition of India he advised the Punjab Boundary Commission. *India and Pakistan: a General and Regional Geography* (1954) cemented his reputation as a leading scholar of the subcontinent, and author of one of the best regional geographies in English. India's government banned the book, and Pakistan considered doing so, giving Spate wry pleasure as it suggested his treatment was evenhanded. An Indian reprint appeared in 1985.

In 1951 Spate took up the Foundation Chair of Geography in the ANU and served with great distinction (1951–67). He became the second Director of the Research School (1967–72). He attracted excellent staff and his Department produced many PhD graduates who went on to senior posts around the world. He built a very productive Department, and fostered collegiality within the School. Graduate students found his erudition awe-inspiring and inspiring, and welcomed the fact that he, like them, could sometimes be found working in the Department after midnight. His love of poetry, elegant use of words, and good academic argument were always evident. A great sense of enjoyment imbued his formal writing, short poems, irreverent limericks and satirical versions of university documents. He often said, 'you don't have to be solemn to be serious' and entitled a selection of his papers *Let Me Enjoy*. In the words of one of his own poems, enjoyment came from his continuing wonder at 'all man's life, his rich abundant world'.

He wrote a perceptive book on *Australia*, and undertook several applied studies. One led to the founding of the University of Papua New Guinea. He helped the establishment of the University of the South Pacific. His report to the colonial Government of Fiji in 1959 on *The Fijian People: Economic Problems and Prospects* is one of the most insightful, valuable, and best-written documents on Fiji. In 1971 he said, 'I put all that I had of intellectual skill and of human passion into the report – perhaps the greatest thing in my life'. It remains highly relevant in 2000 with Fiji again in political, racial and economic turmoil.

A Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, the Australian Academy of the Humanities in Australia, and the British Academy, he was a medallist of the RGS, the AGS, the NGS of India, and the Société de Géographie of Paris; and Laureat d'Honneur of the International Geographical Union. Lake Oskar in the Antarctic is named after him.

Oskar Spate's academic monument will remain his dozen books – from India to Fiji and the wider Pacific – and papers on methodology, exploration, urban geography and historical geography. As one of Asia's great historians, Wang Gungwu, said, Spate's work has a 'brilliantly absorbed sense of history and geography ... and, luminous and lasting quality'.

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