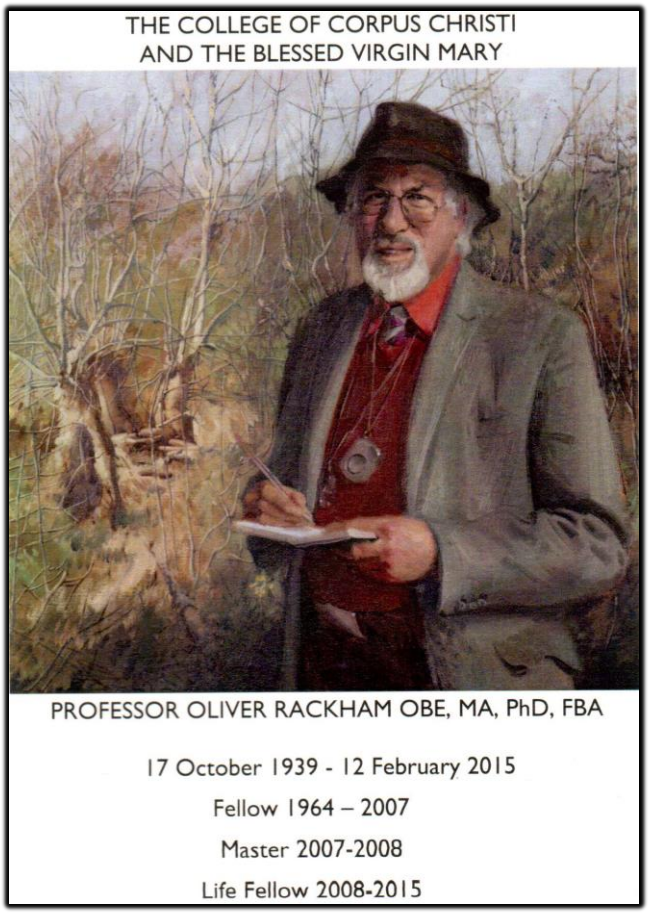
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Cluj-Napoca

IN MEMORIAM

Professor Oliver RACKHAM

(17 October 1939 – 12 February 2015)



Professor Oliver Rackham, MA, PhD, who passed away in Cambridge on 12 February 2015 after a sudden illness, was a much-respected English and European botanist and conservationist who made an enormous contribution to the relatively new science of historical ecology. In this subject he was a pioneer, teaching so many of us to view landscape not only through its constituent rocks, soils, habitats, plants and animals but also on the basis of its ecological and human history. He travelled widely in Britain, Europe and North America but, sadly, his death prevented a planned visit to Transylvania this summer.

Professor Rackham's death was a shock to his many friends and colleagues, and to a wider reading public who knew and admired his books, not least because he always seemed such a young, almost boyish figure, even if a white beard later gave him a mature, rather priestly appearance. I

vividly remember him enthusiastically leading excursions in search of bryophytes, or cycling around his beloved Cambridge, or talking enthusiastically on any topic relevant to his research or general interests, from botany, ecology and practical woodland management to church building timbers, the silver ornaments of the university, or the history of the Venetians on Crete.

I knew Professor Rackham for four decades, first meeting him in 1975 when I was a PhD student newly arrived in Cambridge, on an excursion to the Norfolk coast. This friendly, humorous man immediately welcomed me and, sitting next to him on the bus, I learned much about the medieval churches, manor houses, villages and woodlands we passed and later, out among saltmarshes and sand dunes, about taxonomically difficult coastal plants and even how to cook and eat a moorhen. A naturalist from childhood in Bungay, Suffolk (I once had the pleasure of meeting the proud schoolmaster who taught him biology), he won a scholarship to Cambridge University in 1958, where he later received his PhD. There he evolved from conventional physiological plant ecologist to Renaissance polymath, synthesizing an astonishing array of information to produce scholarly but most readable books on woodland and the wider landscape of the UK – especially his 1984 *History of the Countryside* – and of Crete and the Mediterranean region. His books and articles reached far beyond the academic world and in recent years have made a major impact on efforts to conserve complex ancient landscapes. Professor Rackham's last work, on *The Ash Tree*, currently under threat in Britain from the imported fungal disease *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*, was published in 2014. Indeed, perhaps his most important contribution was, years before it was seen to be a problem, his realization of the treat posed to trees by the globalization of plant pathogens – and a lack of those with the knowledge to combat them.

He was a popular lecturer, even if hard to stop once into his stride! His lectures and books gave him a considerable following among both professional and non-professional audiences. He had the particular skill of viewing ecological problems with a fresh eye and, through careful observation in field and library, he frequently discredited both scientific and popular misconceptions about trees, forests and landscapes. Having developed the concepts of "wildwood" and "ancient woodland", he demonstrated that the English landscape had not progressively lost woodland since Medieval times but that by 1200 much of the pattern of woods and farmland we see today had been established. He was a firm believer in traditional woodland management, which allows for natural regeneration even after great storms, and deplored modern mass tree planting. He saw that the enemy of the countryside is not so much urbanization as expansive modern agriculture. In 1998 Queen Elizabeth awarded him an OBE (Order of the British Empire) for services to conservation, and in 2006 Cambridge University – somewhat belatedly in view of his considerable achievements – appointed him Honorary Professor of Historical Ecology. His University base was Corpus Christi College, where for half a century he was a much-respected Fellow and in 2007 even served for a short time as Master of the College.

This ever-observant naturalist read the landscape like a book, deploring the destruction of so much in the English countryside since 1945. He saw every detail, as for instance how the lowland Meadow Saxifrage (*Saxifraga granulata*) particularly thrives in country churchyards. Thirty years ago he wrote of how this attractive white flower of May "grows on my grandfather's grave and will one day, I hope, adorn mine." In the end, however, following a funeral service that was solemn but never sad, he was laid to rest beneath the nave of the medieval chapel of Corpus Christi College. This great honour is entirely appropriate for Oliver Rackham, whom we fondly remember as a gentleman, scholar and devout Christian, somebody who opened our eyes to nature's detail, its historical interactions with people and – most of all – why it is important.

John AKEROYD