

Obituary: Hugh Alexander Dickey (1947–2021)

ROBERT DIDHAM *



Hugh Dickey was born 3 July 1947, and died at the age of 74 on 8 September 2021. Hugh will be remembered by many PANZ members as an enthusiastic and thoughtful student of population geography, with a passion for population change and the effects of boundaries. He reported some of his findings on the effect of changing boundaries on data at the 2017 PANZ conference, based on the work he was undertaking on the historical boundaries of urban centres.

Hugh's interests in geography and demography developed early. *The Chronicle 1965* of Auckland Grammar School, where Hugh was a 6th form pupil, reported that:

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The school also had a success in the Senior Group of the Natural Sciences section, where H. A. Dickey and G. J. Blaiklock of 6 Special were awarded a Very Highly Commended Certificate for their entry, 'A Social Survey of the Thames Region'. This survey involved many hours of background research and patient enquiry into many topics from transport to labour, and the exhibit showed mature restrained analysis.

Hugh not only believed in sharing his knowledge but also in involving the communities he was looking at. This is most clearly seen in his 2017 book *The Growth of New Zealand Towns*, which gave a sound overview of the development of urbanisation and included snapshots of 64 cities and towns. The second part of the book includes commentary on 50 of these towns written by local collaborators. Hugh pointed out that by 2013, 86 per cent of the country's population lived in centres with populations greater than 1000 people, a feature of colonial settlement that started soon after 1840. Apart from Kororāreka/Russell, prior to 1840 the 2000 European settlers lived not in towns but in scattered camps, focused on whaling, timber and missionary activities.

Urban development was not Hugh's only demographic passion. He extended his work to changing rural landscapes, looking at the interface between urban and rural, with a focus on the centrality of rural Aotearoa New Zealand for the economic history of the country. Despite failing health, Hugh continued work on understanding the effects of changing boundaries on the data underlying our understanding of rural change.

In 2021 Hugh published a companion monograph, *The Changing Face of Rural New Zealand: A study of rural demographic changes over 170 years and the story behind them*. Like in the previous volume, there is a major focus in this volume on the European population, driven at least in part by the lack of reliable or detailed data on Māori for most of the period, though Hugh was by no means blind to the effects of colonial attitudes. The interest in this dimension is seen in his book *The Christian Heritage of Aotearoa New Zealand* (2020), one of his many teaching and curriculum development writings, in which he specifically says that "the purpose

of this book is to bring both a Christian and a Māori focus to the historical material covered”.

One of Hugh’s ambitions was to extend this work on rural Aotearoa New Zealand to produce a more comprehensive overview, as well as considering augmenting his work on urban history. Hugh, in many insightful discussions, outlined to me the bones of these plans, especially his growing passion for rural history and, where he felt he could competently do so, the importance of tangata whenua. At the time of his death, Hugh was still tracking down old maps, gathering what data are available, and analysing his findings for two areas – South Taranaki and Coromandel – as case studies to help formulate a framework for a wider study. In this work, he was confronting the development of rural settlements, economic outcomes and the legacy of dispossessions which transformed society. It was this attention to detail that made Hugh’s work valuable.

Hugh was a man of many parts. What we are celebrating here is Hugh’s contribution to population studies, but what we must never forget is that this was only one dimension of the man. His early career as a high school teacher took an abrupt turn in 1972 when he attended Faith Bible College. From 1973, Hugh devoted the rest of his life to working tirelessly for the Children’s Bible Missions (CBM). And even at the end of his life, Hugh was still writing and contributing to the international work of the Missions, spending most of his time in recent years in the international side of CBM, writing, arranging translations and training teachers in Christian education. His contributions to the well-being of children and his total commitment to his faith will continue to define the memory of many people across Asia and Africa.

Fittingly, Mike Buckley of CBM commented that Hugh was “one of a kind”. That is true. He was also one kind man. A man who always gave back more than he got.