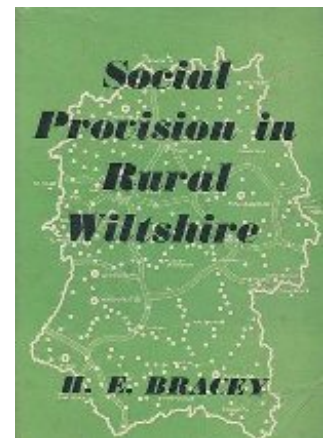


The books that inspired Ron Johnston: “I had no intention of becoming an ‘electoral geographer’, but David Butler and Donald Stokes’ ‘Political Change in Britain’ grabbed my attention”

Ron Johnston shares how some of the books that most influenced him came from outside his undergraduate reading list, and discusses the few books that were seminal to the development of his research career.



While undertaking a final-year undergraduate dissertation at Manchester on economic and social change in my home town of Swindon, I encountered a book in the library by Howard Bracey on [Social Provision in Rural Wiltshire](#) and decided that for my MA I would replicate and expand on it in parts of rural Yorkshire: my family had recently moved to Leeds and my fiancée lived in Batley. We only had five hours of scheduled teaching and so many hours were spent in the library where, with another student, Peter Lewis, I went systematically through the recent volumes of the small number of academic journals in geography then published. During my final year these books and journals led me into a both a subject, central place theory, and an approach, based on statistical analysis, that occupied no place in our undergraduate curriculum. I developed some of my own ideas linking the operation of marketing systems to settlement patterns, my chosen ‘supervisor’ lent me recent publications that drew me deeper into the contemporary American and Swedish literature, and the MA thesis resulted, followed by three journal papers.



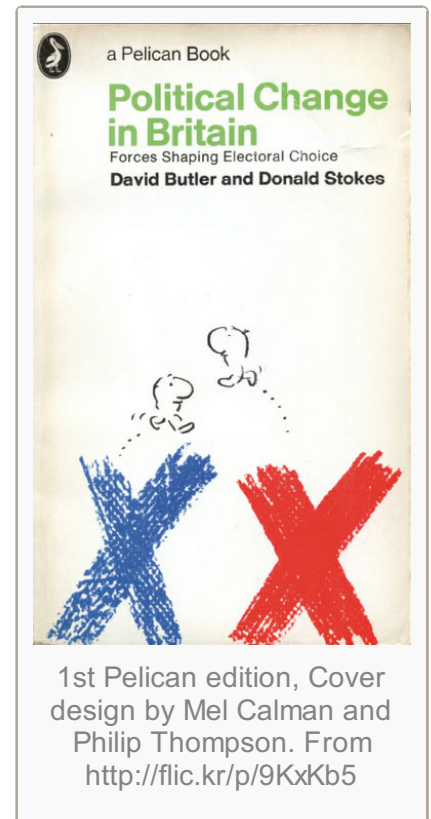
Continuing as a research student and doing a PhD was a rarity in the early 1960s and I started applying for jobs long before the MA was completed. I was successful in getting a three-year Teaching Fellowship at Monash University, where I was expected to develop teaching and research in urban geography – something else outside my undergraduate experience. Again, I searched the literature and found Emrys Jones’ [A Social Geography of Belfast](#), a superbly original piece of scholarship which stimulated many ideas that I planned to put into effect in Melbourne; it led me into a wider literature (mainly in sociology) and new (quantitative) research techniques. Once again I was largely on my own: I had a supportive supervisor and colleagues but most of what I acquired during those three years was self-taught. During those three years, the appearance in 1965 of Peter Haggett’s [Locational Analysis in Human Geography](#) provided the underpinning framework for the wider project to recreate human geography as spatial science to which I and several of my colleagues became enthusiastic supporters over the next decade.

Self-instruction was also a feature of my development into what some people referred to in the 1960s as a ‘quantitative human geographer’. A 1963 book by Stan Gregory (later to be a close colleague and friend at Sheffield) on [Statistical Methods and the Geographer](#) provided basic understanding but this didn’t extend to the multivariate techniques I was exploring. When I moved to the University of Canterbury in 1967 I took over an introductory statistics course that Bill Clark had designed with Hubert Blalock’s [Social Statistics](#) as the text: working through that book as I prepared the lectures and practicals was crucial to my education – while Siegel’s [Nonparametric Statistics](#) and Harman’s *Modern Factor Analysis* (the technique for which I developed the first FORTRAN programs in the country) helped me very considerably.

I moved to New Zealand in 1967 as an urban geographer, and continued to apply and develop the ideas and methods that underpinned the PhD. And then in 1969 I read a programmatic essay by Kevin Cox – in the first issue of a new serial *Progress in Geography* – on ‘The voting decision in a spatial context’. This overlapped with my urban geography interests, and I devised a couple of successful ‘experiments’ to test some of its ideas with New Zealand data.

I had no intention at that stage of becoming an ‘electoral geographer’ – indeed I went on leave to Canada and the UK in 1972-1973 with the main intention of working on gravity models and international trade flows. But during a six-month stay at the LSE I used my commuting journeys from Croydon to read a range of recent social science books. The one that grabbed my attention much more than any other was David Butler and Donald Stokes’ *Political Change in Britain*, which opened my eyes to the potential of work studying elections from a wider spatial (i.e. geographical) perspective than that stimulated by Cox’s essay and other papers. I started such work when I returned to New Zealand.

A year later I came back to the UK and quickly developed a close collaboration in electoral geography with Peter Taylor. Alongside a number of small research projects we also wrote a text on *The Geography of Elections*, while at the same time he was completing a highly original research monograph with Graham Gudgin on *Seats, Votes and the Spatial Organisation of Elections*, which appeared in the same year (1979). A few years later our collaboration ended, as Pete explored pastures new. But I stuck with elections and *Seats, Votes...* was the stimulus for the wide-ranging – if unplanned and pragmatic – research programme that I have pursued ever since with a range of first-rate collaborators (some of whom began their careers as research students under my supervision); Charles Pattie and I draw it all together in our 2006 volume *Putting Voters in their Place*. I have been delighted to write the introduction for a reprint of *Seats, Votes...*, publicly paying homage to a classic in electoral studies whose insights have not been bettered over the three decades since it first appeared.



Those few books were seminal to the development of my research career – both for the stimuli that they provided themselves and for the literatures that they led me into. Decades ago I characterised my career trajectory as that of a ‘foundling floundering in World Three’ – Popper’s world of published knowledge. I lacked the stimuli of an undergraduate curriculum that introduced me to a revolution in geographical practice then stirring up American geography and bringing new ideas to its journals, of which those who taught us were apparently totally unaware; and as a PhD student I was largely self-taught as I explored and sought to understand and find a way in a new academic world. After initially establishing myself in one niche within that new world on the basis of one highly-influential book, two others saw me move into the interdisciplinary world of electoral studies. The floundering continues – it has been a rewarding, if unstructured, way of learning.

My general reading has become influenced by the books that guided my career trajectory. I was always a fairly voracious reader of fiction – especially twentieth century (Greene, Moravia, Steinbeck, Roth, etc.) – and detective novels. Until well into my twenties I was largely apolitical although mildly of the left (which did not reflect my c/Conservative rural southern England background). As I became more interested in elections, a desire to read about politics flowered – mainly nineteenth and twentieth century British politics, as well as those of New Zealand (reflecting eight happy years there and many visits since because our daughter moved to Canterbury in 1994). This includes political biography – and also academic biography (for the past five years I have been privileged to edit the annual volume of

memoirs of deceased Fellows of the British Academy): although that might have happened in any case – my former undergraduate tutor once asked me if I read much biography: I replied no, to which he said (rightly as it turned out) “you will as you get older”!

All of that reading was of hard copy – much of it heavily annotated, especially copies of books which I reviewed (mainly for academic journals – more than 350 to date). I now have an iPad, but still buy the hard copies!

Ron Johnston is Professor of Geography at the [University of Bristol](#). Ron’s academic work has focused on political geography (especially electoral studies), urban geography, and the history of human geography.

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