

## Obituary

### Emeritus Professor Ian Carter

Steve Matthewman\*

The sociological community was saddened to hear of the passing of Emeritus Professor Ian Carter on 26 July 2025.

After leaving Luton Grammar School as Head Prefect in the nineteen-sixties, Ian wrote that “my teachers expected me to study English or history at university. I decided to plump for raunchy, racy, fashionable sociology instead” (Carter, 2005, p. 122). He had a County Major Scholarship to study sociology at Bath University of Technology, where he gained his BA degree (1963–67), an SSRC Quota Postgraduate Award to study an MA in Sociology with Distinction in Methodology at Essex University (1967–8), before completing a PhD at Aberdeen University in 1976 (University of Auckland Council, 1980, p. 563).

Ian was appointed Professor and Head of Department of Sociology at the University of Auckland in 1982. He retired in 2009. This must surely make him one of the university’s longest serving professors. He certainly had a standing and authority within the institution that enabled him to have fun with traditional academic conventions and administrative structures. It’s hard to imagine the final paragraph of someone’s sabbatical report reading like this today:

Finally, I must express my gratitude to Council for granting me long leave. After thirteen years, I needed it. When *Ancient cultures of conceit* is published to outraged reviews in *The Daily Telegraph*, I trust that Council will think their resources well used. (Carter, 1989)

Emeritus Professor in Physics Geoff Austin stated that,

Ian contributed greatly in trying to make the university a collegial and intellectually stimulating environment for both students and staff against a growing corporate model of the institution dominated by micro accounting. The university is a much better place for his efforts, and I believe that many of my colleagues would like to acknowledge this contribution publicly.

Ian arrived in Auckland as a rural sociologist of note, his highly regarded work *Farm life in Northeast Scotland, 1840–1914* had been published in 1979. Despite taking issue with its ‘ugly’ Marxist framing, Malcolm Gray’s (1981) assessments were overwhelmingly complimentary. In the *Scottish Historical Review*, he noted that “Dr Ian Carter ... shows with convincing, and indeed devastating, argument that the north-east is an area highly distinctive in its rural society, its social aims and its agricultural modes” (Gray, 1981, p.81), concluding that the work is “a rich offering”, furnishing “much good economic analysis, a perceptive understanding of the subtleties of human relations and of the springs of endeavour, and an interesting thesis on the ideology of class relationships” (Gray, 1981, p.83).

Though many expected him to continue in this furrow, Ian had other ideas ... Mary Holmes, Professor of Emotions and Society at the University of Edinburgh worked at Aberdeen after completing her PhD at Auckland. She noted that Ian was “fondly remembered” there: “They were amused to hear that having been hired as a rural sociologist at Auckland, he almost immediately abandoned that and started

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\* Steve Matthewman is a professor in Sociology at Waipapa Taumata Rau | University of Auckland.  
Email: [s.matthewman@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:s.matthewman@auckland.ac.nz)

writing about campus novels and being interested in the history of the railways”. Former colleague, Professor Wendy Lerner, President and Vice Chancellor of Cardiff University, recalled:

Ian’s distinctive academic style. He was an intellectual polymath who was hard to pigeon-hole—rural sociologist, cultural historian, social theorist—all labels which inadequately capture his research contributions. His writing was always accessible, and although sometimes idiosyncratic, inevitably thought provoking. His legacy is significant, and he will be greatly missed.

Ravi Palat, another former colleague, now resident in the US, said:

The university was Ian’s *métier*. He was fully immersed in its intellectual and cultural milieu: appreciation of art and literature, of intellectual exploration across disciplinary fields. But as the title of one of his books *Ancient cultures of conceit* suggests, he was not fully of it... Hobnobbing with other professors for personal or professional gain was not in his character. Yet, Ian was scrupulous in looking after the interests of the academic and general staff in the department. He knew their strengths and worked with them to best advance their careers. If there were differences within the department, as was inevitable, he worked hard to ensure that a consensus emerged. From personal experience, I know how supportive he could be.

Here, Professor Lerner concurs,

Ian was Head of Department when I was recruited to ... Sociology ... at Auckland. He was a true scholar, intellectually generous and institutionally adept, and a great role model for the many early career colleagues he supported. It is notable how many of us have gone on to become successful academics in Aotearoa and beyond.

Emeritus Professor Cluny McPherson, who joined the Department of Sociology in 1973, reiterates these observations.

Ian Carter was a kind and supportive leader. He led the department through some very good times and some more difficult times with dignity, patience and humour. He defended our discipline with vigour when necessary but worked to promote interdisciplinary collaboration with a number of disciplines, especially his beloved history, when he believed it offered benefits to us all and to our students. He promoted, and personified, collegiality and humanity and I consider myself lucky to have worked with such a clever and decent human.

I first met Ian at the University of Auckland’s open day in 1988. He pounced on me after I came out of the lifts on level 9 of the Human Sciences Building. Apparently, few University visitors made it there. At the time I didn’t know what Sociology was, much less if I wanted to study it. Ian ushered me into the postgraduate tearoom for a chat. All I remember from our first meeting is him telling me that this was the best view in town and that I wouldn’t see it again until I was a graduate student or a permanent member of staff. I doubted I’d ever be either, but I became both, thanks in large measure to Ian. I took courses taught by him; he supervised my MA dissertation and my PhD.

I’d like to say that I was his best and/or favourite student, but while US politics are post-truth, NZ Sociology retains a commitment to integrity. There are many candidates for his top student as he had over 50 graduate supervisions across his career, including my wife, Tracey McIntosh. “Without Ian”, Angela Maynard notes, “the Sociology of Food would never have made it to Aotearoa/New Zealand”. “I had the privilege of taking over this paper after Ian retired which was a little daunting but intellectually exciting and, indeed, fun. On a personal level”, she recalls,

his scholarship enabled me to do a PhD in the topic, so I am immensely grateful to him for this. He was a fun supervisor, one year directing me to a solitaire game when I thought he was going to give me a chapter task over summer.

His last PhD student, Patricia Ubeda, completed in 2008. She noted that, “he was a brilliant light in my sky as a lecturer and eventually my supervisor”.

I was a colleague of Ian’s for nearly nine years. He was always a model for what good Sociology should be: rigorously researched, brilliantly written, illuminating and insightful. In a review of Ian’s book *British railway enthusiasm* (2008), Scott Hamilton, a former PhD student, explained Ian’s method thus,

Like his heroes, the American sociologist C. Wright Mills and the Welsh cultural historian Raymond Williams, Carter likes to select a single, relatively limited subject as a sort of ‘keyhole’ through which he can view a whole society and era.

And while Ian was well aware that the discipline could be “Germanic and dull”, his own work consistently countered this. He was never averse to the use of humour. Here’s an example from a review essay on one of his favourite novelists, José Saramago, who he felt was both criminally neglected and woefully underappreciated in the Anglosphere:

*The Cave*, reported James R. Merikangas, MD (2004: 2335) in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, ‘is the simple story of a potter, his daughter, his son-in-law, and a stray dog.’ True enough; but only to the extent that Oedipus Rex – to take a fiction with which Dr Merikangas may enjoy some nodding acquaintance – is the simple story of a Greek bloke, his father and his mother. (Carter, 2005, p. 125–6)

“And a strange monster sitting on a rock”, added a retired colleague from Classics when I relayed this to him, who went on to recall,

anybody who liked PG Wodehouse as much as Ian did was most certainly a civilised and cultured person. He even gave me a Wodehouse encyclopaedia of which he had two copies. And (best of all) he once laughed audibly at a joke I made at a Faculty meeting; only time that ever happened.

As noted, Ian was an excellent writer and an excellent lecturer. It was equally entertaining to see how he interacted with other academics. French intellectual Pierre Bourdieu (2010) famously observed that sociology is a martial art, and anyone who attended the department’s weekly seminar series in the 1990s would be heavily inclined to agree. Presenters were given an hour to make their case, after which a further hour was set aside for intellectual combat. One of the great spectator sports of the time was seeing how Ian would treat that week’s offering (sorry, speaker). A fresh-faced junior lecturer from Geography once presented on a topic in political economy. Ian was the first to engage. He said: “That’s not political economy, that’s the scum that floats on the river of political economy!” (At his farewell, even his family affectionately remembered him as a grumpy old Marxist.) Thankfully the presenter made a complete recovery and is now a fully-fledged Professor in the School of Environment at the University.

Since it was so rare for anyone else to get the last word in an intellectual exchange with Ian, it is only fitting that the final words here should be his. In a piece for *Thesis Eleven* he wrote: “Though we laud the sociological imagination to our students, we all seem to harbour a trained incapacity for imaginative writing. This should make us think hard about our collective enterprise...” Before urging that, “we must sustain a broad and liberal conception of what our discipline is, and how to go about doing it” (Carter, 2005, p. 130).

Vale Ian Carter. 1943–2025.

## Acknowledgements

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