

Preston E. James Eminent Latin Americanist Career Award



David J. Robinson

The Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers honors David J. Robinson with the Preston E. James Eminent Latin Americanist Career Award. Professor Robinson is an individual who has accomplished an outstanding record of fieldwork, research, publication, teaching, and service to Latin American geography. His record of scholarship is the product of intense, dedicated work. Many adjectives come to mind which might describe David Robinson—hard working, tireless, indefatigable and, yes, at times perhaps even obsessed. Beside the virtue of self discipline, he has been blessed with a keen analytical mind. And, while chronologically his career is only at its mid-point, his scholarly achievements are commensurate with those of very productive scholars at the end of their career.

During the course of his academic career, David J. Robinson has written or edited eight scholarly books or monographs, served as the originator and editor of the *Dellplain Series in Latin American geography*, and published many scholarly articles and reports. His research has focused principally on the historical geography of Hispanic America, especially issues relating to demography, migration, and social structure. His books include: *Social Fabric and Spatial Structure in Colonial Latin America* (1981); *Research Inventory of the Mexican Collection of Colonial Parish Registers* (1980); *Studying Latin America: Essays in Honor of Preston E. James* (1980); *Studies in Spanish American Population History* (1981); *Catálogo del Archivo del Registro Público de la Propiedad de Guadalajara: Libros de Hipotecas, 1566-1820* (with Linda Greenow) (1986); *Relación de la Provincia de Antioquia por don Francisco Silvestre* (1988); *Migration in Colonial Spanish America* (1990); and *Mil leguas por América: de Lima a Caracas, 1740-1741. Diario de don Miguel de Santisteban* (1992).

Not only has Professor Robinson produced a significant body of scholarly research but, as the originator and editor of the *Dellplain Series in Latin American Geography*, he has provided a medium for the publication of scholarly, book-length manuscripts on Latin American geography. In the 13 years since the founding of this series, over 28 volumes have been published. **[end p. 114]**

One other aspect of David Robinson's research record is worth noting—his willingness to publish in Spanish. In an academic atmosphere which frequently ignores, and at worst even denigrates scholarly publication in languages other than English, he has insisted on publishing original work, both as articles and books, in Spanish. This regard for a region, a people, and a language, he deeply respects is most commendable, and represents a lead more Latin Americanist geographers should follow.

David Robinson "knows" Latin America. But the real meaning of this comes out better in Spanish—"David Robinson conoce América Latina". He speaks perfect Spanish with a delivery so quick it leaves even native speakers a bit breathless. And, at a time when the virtues of fieldwork have been ignored by many of our colleagues, he has traveled and worked throughout Hispanic America. His travels, reesearch, and subsequent publications have spanned the full extent of the territory from Mexico to Argentina. In addition to both those countries, he also has resided for longer or shorter periods in Venezuela, Mexico, Colombia, and Peru, living in the latter for over three years.

Professor Robinson is not the kind of historical geographer who is content with culling the archives of major collections and depositories---he haunts the regional, provincial, and local archives and travels the length and breadth of those regions whose geographic histories he is attempting to reconstruct.

David Robinson is not only a historical geographer, as though that were not enough. He is a geographer in the best and broadest sense of that word. His wide training and knowledge, inquisitive and logical mind, quick wit, and focused work habits have served him, and others, well. In the late 1960s he served for two years as a geographical advisor to the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and then, beginning in the early 1980s, he headed a regional planning and development team working for the United States Agency for International Development in the Peruvian sierra. In that capacity he directed a team of 20 professional and support personnel which provided technical assistance to an integrated regional development program with a budget of over \$20 million.

Perhaps Professor Robinson's greatest contribution to Latin American geography has been his role as a teacher. He is an energetic mentor whose enthusiasm for Latin America is infectious and whose agile mind and command of the literature make him the ideal sounding board for graduate students' ideas and efforts. He has already guided and supervised over 15 Ph.D. students to eventual completion of their doctoral dissertations--not an insignificant feat. Five more are poised to defend their dissertations shortly. Professor Robinson's style of mentoring, to use a not popular phrase, might be termed "tough love." He is simultaneously a very demanding and yet an extremely supportive mentor--pushing, suggesting, facilitating, insisting, empathizing, and encouraging.

The value of David Robinson's contributions to geography have not gone unnoticed beyond the limits of our own disciplinary territory. He has received awards and honors from others including Fulbright awards to Brazil and Venezuela (1988 and 1990), a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies (1988), a National Geographic Research Award to work in Peru (1989), and a Guggenheim Fellowship (1991).

Professor Robinson began his career as a member of the faculty of University College London and has lectured at numerous universities in the United States, Great Britain, and Latin America. Presently, he is the Dellplain Professor of Latin American Geography at Syracuse University. During his years at Syracuse, David Robinson has nurtured and further developed the legacy of Latin American scholarship that Preston E. James began there nearly 50 years ago. In so doing he has firmly established Syracuse University as one of the few bastions, and indeed, perhaps the only bastion, for graduate-level study of Latin American geography in the northeastern United States.

But, one should not come away from reading this with the idea that David Robinson is some kind of type-A geographical nerd, sequestered among his notes, books, maps, microfiche reader, and computer. No, he plays as hard as he works. He has coupled a full personal life with a very productive academic career. He has a quick engaging sense of humor and he can even be mischievous at times.

Most of us have some key experiences which marked important milestones in our decisions to become geographers--and so too our honoree. Folk wisdom holds that one of his key experiences dates from his secondary school days in Great Britain. It seems that the instructor [end p. 115] who taught geography was a bit of an arrogant bore who knew little and cared less about the subject. So, in league with a couple of classmates, David Robinson focused great energy on learning the geography lessons, studying the footnotes, and finding supplemental material, and then used this command of the subject to enliven class meetings by frustrating the geography instructor with knowledgeable questions he could not answer. So began Robinson's career as a geographer. [end p. 116]

Robert B. Kent