

William Bayne Fisher**(1916–1984)****David K. Chester**

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From a relatively humble background, Bill Fisher rose to become professor and head of the geography department at Durham. Substantially expanding its student numbers, staff, buildings and equipment, he created there a leading British geography department, noted for the school of applied geography which he led. A combination of education in the school of French regional geography, first in Manchester and later at the Sorbonne, wartime experience in the Middle East, and a conviction that geographers could help to remake a better post-war world underpinned his many applied geographical projects, starting in Malta and extending to the Middle East and elsewhere. For these projects Fisher secured substantial external funding, something which was highly unusual at the time, and they provided

important training for Durham's geographical staff and students. The material gathered in the field was put at the service of the authorities in the regions concerned, and also formed the basis of his own research writings where his character and views are more readily observable. Though his approach was criticised towards the end of his life as being politically naïve and methodologically dated, he remained convinced of its usefulness and currency. A genial man who took his responsibilities seriously, he is fondly remembered by students and colleagues, though his academic reputation has survived better outside geography than within it.

Background, Education, Influences, Life and Work

William Bayne Fisher was born William Bayne Fish, on 24 September 1916 in Darwen, a Lancashire cotton town around 30 km northwest of Manchester. His father was George Ward Fish (1889–1945), then Company Quartermaster Sergeant in the Lancashire Regiment, but a schoolmaster by profession. His mother was Margaret Fish (née Bayne) (1888–1952). The family home was a tall stone built semi-detached house constructed in 1869. Bill had a younger sister, Barbara (1920–2005). Like his later research supervisor at the Sorbonne in Paris, Alfred Demangeon (1872–1940, see *Geographers* 11) (Parker 1987), Fish was an intellectually able boy from a under privileged provincial background (Clout 2003b). To the end of his life he retained his Lancashire accent, albeit modified,. Although educated at Darwen Grammar School (c.1927–1934), Bill had to fight for a place at university because surprisingly his headmaster was firmly set against boys progressing to university. Fish

had to absent himself from school to sit the University of Manchester entrance examination, which he passed with a scholarship carrying with it the obligation to train as a school teacher (Clarke 1984; Fisher 1972, pers. comm.).

Fish's intellectual foundation and the influences which shaped him are readily discoverable from the detailed narrative biographies he submitted when applying for a readership and later for a chair in geography at Durham (Fisher 1953a, 1956). In addition and in various publications, Fisher identified scholars whose work inspired his own and described experiences at the Universities of Manchester and Paris, and the academic impact of war service in the Royal Air Force (RAF) (Fisher 1950; Fisher with Bowen-Jones 1974).

In 1934 Fish entered the geography department of the University of Manchester, taking a first class Bachelor of Arts degree in 1937 and graduating a year later with a first class teachers' diploma and certificate. Fish was a talented linguist, fluent in French and with reading competence in several additional European languages including German, Italian and Spanish (Anderson 2022; Laxton 2022). Fish's abilities in the languages of the Middle East are less certain; one former colleague claimed that he was able to succeed across the region (Anderson 2022), but another believed his abilities to be more circumscribed (Blake 2022). He always encouraged, however, new researchers to become fluent in the languages of the countries they were studying. In Manchester Fish first encountered the 'French school' of regional geography while working under Professor Herbert John Fleure, FRS (1877–1969, see *Geographers* 11) (Fleming 1987). Guernsey born and bilingual in French and English, Fleure originally trained in zoology and was a key figure in establishing geography and anthropology as academic disciplines in British

universities. His wide interests included zoology, geography, anthropology, geology, history, prehistory and sociology (Bowen 1970).

At Aberystwyth and later in Manchester, Fleure influenced a generation of young British geographers, who in addition to Fish included Emyr Estyn Evans (1905–1989; see *Geographers* 25) and Emrys George Bowen (1900–1983) (Garnett 1970; Thomas 1987; Clout 2005). Like Fleure, Fisher was elected a fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute and he carried his interests in physical and social anthropology into his research and writing, but also in building the Durham department. In the preface to the first edition of *The Middle East*, Fisher pays a glowing tribute to Fleure:

it is upon his teaching and example that much of this book is based, and, where possible, I should be proud to think that the following pages could convey even the slightest echo of the lofty thought, brilliance in interpretation, and warm humanism that are characteristic of Professor Fleure's approach to geography' (Fisher 1950, vii).

Another powerful influence on Fish was Vaughan Cornish (1862–1948), a British geographer with interests embracing the study of wave forms, frontiers and capitals, historical and political geography and landscape aesthetics (Goudie 1972). Cornish worked in 'exotic' places and held now controversial views on eugenics and the British empire (Dodds 1994). Professor Ewan Anderson (2022), a friend and research associate in the last decade of Fisher's life, considers that Cornish influenced Fish most through his research and writings on landscape, the beauties of nature and the importance of the physical environment within regional contexts (Cornish 1943; Matless 1991).

Following teacher training, Fish used a graduate research scholarship and a David Travelling Scholarship from the University of Manchester to study at the

Sorbonne under the direction of professors Alfred Demangeon (Parker 1987) and Emmanuel de Martonne (1873–1955) (Dresch 1988). With a major thesis on population distribution and migration in Normandy 1821–1935 (Fish 1940b) and a supplementary study of aspects of English historical geography, he graduated Docteur de l'Université with *mention très honorable* (Fisher 1953a). In France Fish was influenced directly by his supervisors, particularly Demangeon (Fisher 1950, vii), 'but also more generally [by] the Vidalian tradition (Vidal de la Blache 1903; see *Geographers* 12; Baker 1988) with its focus on the ways in which landscape (*paysage*) is forged by people making the most of the possibilities afforded by their natural setting (*milieu*), to create distinctive ways of life (*genres de vie*)' (Schembri *et al.* 2020, supplementary material, 2). These themes are evident in his doctoral thesis and much of his subsequent research.

A further intellectual influence on Fish from his days in Paris and the Francophone Middle East was geographer and anthropologist Jacques Weulersse (1905–1946; see *Geographers* 1). Like Fish, Weulersse studied in Paris under Demangeon and de Martonne, and was on the staff of Aix–Marseille Université from 1943. He travelled to many French colonies countries and during the war was dispatched on a mission to the Levant. He focused on human geography and anthropology, specialising on Syria – his doctorate being on the Alawite community – and addressed social questions and development issues in Arabia, north Africa and the Levant (Weulersse 1946). He had a short but highly productive academic career (Colin 1947). Whether Fish worked with or even knew Weulersse in Paris or in the Middle East is unknown, but he considered that

no better model of could be found of an exposition of Middle Eastern geography than the remarkable studies of the late Professor Weulersse, in whose writings there is propounded the thesis that only by the close integration of geography and history can full understanding of human society be achieved (Fisher 1950, v).

Fisher graduated from the Sorbonne soon after the outbreak of the Second World War and, in the wake of the German invasion, he quickly joined the Royal Air Force (RAF).

In 1941 I was posted abroad as an RAF meteorologist and telecommunications officer and was stationed, first in Eritrea, then successively [in] Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Cyrenaica and the Lebanon. In the Middle East I had considerable opportunities for first-hand field observation, and research into geographical problems of the area. My duties involved investigations, not only of meteorological and electrical phenomena, but also economic and social questions, since after 1943 I was senior RAF technical representative in Syria and the Lebanon, and was asked to advise on, and supply, data for agricultural, fiscal and development programmes initiated by the British military authorities. ... During part of my stay in the Middle East, I was fortunate in being associated with Dr. L. Dubertret, now Chief Geologist in Syria and the Lebanon, and also in having the interest and advice of Dr. Bayard Dodge, at the time President of the American University of Beirut' (Fisher 1953a, n.p.; La Moreaux 1985).

Over two decades later Fisher and his long standing Durham colleague, Howard Bowen-Jones (1921–2015) who had served in the British army, reminisced about their war service:

a number of geographers ... had spent various periods abroad in uniform, and we, in common with many others, were anxious to put this involuntary field experience to a more permanent use that would also display practicality and involvement relative to the problems of the time. We also had the clear view that geography could and ought to offer a novel approach to specific problems of economic and social development in various parts of the world; the Mediterranean, Middle East and points further east where our personal experience had lain (Fisher with Bowen-Jones 1974, 454)

This manifesto guided much of Fisher's subsequent research, especially its applied aspects, and characterised the Durham department under his headship. As noted by Schembri *et al.* (2020), in the 1940s and 50s:

applied geography was often justified – either implicitly or explicitly – by using arguments developed by American pragmatist philosophers especially those of John Dewey (1859–1952). It is notable that there are clear parallels between Fisher and Bowen-Jones' "manifesto" for geography and three of pragmatism's key components: a recognition of human precariousness; the belief that research should focus on issues of development and human betterment and that enquiries should be informed by experience, rather than by overarching theory (Schembri *et al.* 2020, supplementary material, 3–4; Wescoat 1992; White 2002).

This lack 'overarching social theory' is discussed in more detail later, but a desire to use academic research in the pursuit of human betterment characterised much of Fish's academic career.

Fish's experience as a lecturer began in Manchester in 1937–8 when, in Fleure's absence, he delivered classes to undergraduates and in 1944–5 he taught RAF personnel and students at the American University of Beirut. Returning to the United Kingdom and for reasons that remain unclear, in April 1946 Fish changed his name to 'Fisher' (Anon 1946) and returned to Manchester as assistant lecturer with responsibility for climatology, historical geography and the Middle East. In 1947 Fisher accepted a lectureship at the University of Aberdeen where he had even greater teaching responsibilities (Fisher 2019). Despite this heavy load, he continued to publish and quickly established himself nationally and internationally as an expert on the geography and geopolitics of the Middle East. He lectured to and interacted with a wide variety of bodies and universities including: UNESCO (Natural Science Commission on Arid Zones); Princeton University's Consultative Committee on Near

Eastern Studies; the British Council in Lebanon; the Turkish General Staff; the French Legation and British Ministers in Damascus and government officials in Syria. Fisher also provided formal statements on the Israeli-Syrian frontier dispute in 1950 and 1951 and lectured at the Universities of Jerusalem (Hebrew University), Istanbul and many higher education institutions across the UK. Fisher secured research funding from the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland to visit Turkey (now Türkiye), the Levant and Libya; and in Aberdeen, as well as teaching geography, he lectured on geographical themes for students of French, classics and biblical exegesis (Fisher 1953b, 1956). Fisher's time in Aberdeen culminated in his leadership of a major expedition to Libya in 1951, funded in part by Carnegie and the university. It concentrated on land use and ecology. In a region much destroyed during the desert war (1940–43), the British Foreign Office viewed the expedition as diplomatically important in fostering post war development and strong relationships with the United Kingdom. A chartered aircraft was provided and visits were arranged with members the newly independent Libyan government including King Idris (Fisher 1952, 1953b, 1953c). This combination of detailed empirical field work and interaction with government at the highest level set the pattern for many future research projects.

The Durham Years

In 1954 Fisher became Reader and head of the geography department and in 1956 he was promoted the first Professor of Geography in the Durham Colleges Division of the University of Durham, Durham then being a federal university with colleges in Durham, Newcastle, Barbados and Sierra Leone. Fisher successfully raised Durham's

academic standing in three ways: first, through the establishment of an interdisciplinary Middle East Centre of which he was first director from 1962; second, as Vice-Master of Hatfield College at Durham 1955–1964 (Anon 2020) and from 1965 as Principal of the Graduate Society, which housed the growing number of British and overseas graduate students who chose not to live in the undergraduate dominated colleges of the university; and third and most significantly, he established himself as one of the foremost Anglophone geographers of the Middle East, and transformed the Durham geography department into one of the largest and academically most diverse in the country. Having been appointed to a permanent headship, Fisher was able over the next twenty-seven years to shape the department according to his vision (Clarke 2005), and appoint over ninety long and short term staff (Anon 1985). Fisher was concerned with three related tasks: to develop applied research; to build a strong department and to pursue his own research.

Developing Applied Research

Applied research for the United Kingdom and foreign governments became a defining characteristic of the Durham department under Fisher's leadership. A pioneering study of the development potential of Malta was followed by resource assessments of countries across the Middle East, including Ethiopia; Iran; Jordan; Libya; Oman; Saudi Arabia and what is now the United Arab Emirates (Fisher 1966, 1968a; Fisher with Bowen-Jones 1974). Between the 1950s and the close of the 1970s, when research funds were far harder to come by than they are today, Fisher secured monies for himself, his colleagues, research students and the department

from bodies as diverse as: the Rockefeller Foundation in the USA; the British Colonial Office and numerous Middle Eastern governments; as well as UK-based research funders including several research councils.

This applied research began in the 1950s when three of the four lecturers in the department – Fisher, Bowen-Jones (appointed 1947) and John Dewdney (Dewdney 1952) – secured funding for a major study of the islands inspired by Laurence Dudley Stamp's landuse approach (Stamp 1948; see *Geographers* 12). The Warden (that is, the head) of the Durham Colleges Division of the university was Sir James Duff (1898–1970), a Latinist, educationalist and university administrator who served in Durham 1937–1960 and who 'could and did back winners' [and supported the] 'drive and totally committed dynamism which Bill Fisher injected' (Bowen-Jones 1989, 9). Fisher persuaded Duff to support a pilot study of Malta (Bowen-Jones 1989, 9) in order to use its results to seek more substantial funding. He then sought local partners among Maltese academics and finally presented a joint proposal to the UK Colonial Research Council's Colonial Economic Research Committee (CERC). Thanks in part to lobbying by Duff a grant of £9,235 (over £250,000 at 2023 prices) was secured: about 20 per cent of the CERC total budget for UK universities (Duff 1954; Schembri *et al.* 2020). CERC archives in the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) (Chilver 1955) show the high regard in which the Durham research proposal was held by government officials and the application was timely in the lead up to Malta's independence from Britain (secured in 1964). The grant allowed postdoctoral staff and research students to be appointed and funded field work for established university staff, including Fisher, Bowen-Jones and Dewdney, and undergraduate assistants. It was a considerable achievement and later proposals

often to foreign governments were frequently preceded by a pilot study and the recruitment of a team from Durham covering a wide range of expertise. This dominated research in the department for the rest of the decade (Bowen-Jones *et al.* 1961). Applied research in Malta continued after independence as consultancy for the government (Anderson and Schembri 1989) and in supervised doctoral research (e.g. Schembri 2003). As Johnston and Williams (2003, 3) note, such research projects were exceptional for the time because ‘with a few notable exceptions ... a research culture only blossomed in UK geography departments during the last third of the twentieth century’ (see also Johnston 2003).

This type of applied geography became the hallmark of the Durham geography department and it was, ‘like most geography of the period ... founded on a simple realism, which relied on the collection of “facts” without any theoretical basis’ (Simmons 2020, 22). The Maltese project focused on Fisher’s established interests, background and influences, as did later studies, and its report comprised: physical geography; demography and migration; an anthropological study of the Maltese family; landuse mapping and agricultural survey; regional study and Maltese history, economy and society – all in exhaustive detail (Bowen-Jones *et al.* 1961). The project provided data to underpin development decisions but avoided policy pronouncements on development opportunities or criticism of established policy (Schembri *et al.* 2020). In Malta and in subsequent studies across in the Middle East, Fisher an ethnographer as well as a geographer, placed great store on his subordinates’ learning the languages of the places they were studying and being fully immersed in local culture (Fisher with Drakakis-Smith 1976; Beeley 2017, pers. comm.).

Fisher and his colleagues took great pride in their model of applied research and in 1970 the department boasted that ‘a great deal of the geographical work undertaken at Durham may be described as “applied geography”, and the staff act as consultants for the Ministry of Overseas Development and foreign governments’ (Anon 1969, 73). This marked the high point of Fisher’s self confidence, because from the 1970s the ‘Durham model’ of applied research came under severe criticism from two quarters. One reviewer criticised the methodology of the Malta project and suggested that the authors should have engaged with their data to suggest better ways in which the islands’ resources could be used in the future (Young 1962), but more trenchant criticism came from the Marxist geographer David Harvey (1973, 1974), who argued that such studies offered:

covert support and legitimisation ... to the state and its agencies, prevailing ideologies and, in the context of Malta, a shoring-up of post-colonial independence agreements and desired patterns of future economic and political development (Schembri *et al.* 2020, 2).

The *Zeitgeist* was changing, but Fisher disagreed with the Marxist critique, (Anderson 2022, pers. comm.) and Durham remained wedded to what appeared to many to be an approach out of step with dominant critical orthodoxy.

Durham colleague Ian Simmons (Simmons 2020, 22) further noted that the result of surveys rarely found their way ‘into mainstream print, so that their foundational characteristics are perhaps underestimated, being immured in a departmental series of publications’. In fact, researchers did use data collected during consultancy work to express opinions and suggest policy options more candidly and critically in the academic press than in official reports. Examples include: later editions of Fisher’s *Middle East*, publications on the region as a whole,

particularly its geopolitics (Fisher 1958); on individual countries including Iran (Fisher 1968b), Jordan (Fisher 1972c), Saudi Arabia (Fisher 1972a, 1972b, 1979c); and the oil states (Fisher 1980). Doctoral students did the same in their theses, with those on Malta (Beeley 1960; Charlton 1960); Libya (Hill 1960) and soils across the Middle East (Stevens 1973), being cases in point. Looking back at their corpus of research and conscious of criticism, Fisher and Bowen-Jones remained unrepentant and used arguments from anthropology to justify their methodology (Fisher with Bowen Jones 1974). Independence of government sponsored development initiatives and policy, they argued, allowed them to develop contacts among local people who would be suspicious of government officials, and they could thereby understand the complex connections among environmental, cultural and technical conditions. Nonetheless Bennett and Wilson's views on applied geography in British universities in the late 1960s sum up the situation in Durham:

applied geographical work was in some form of crisis. The old style of much applied geography, focusing on description and classification with little theory, was ending: the field of regional and land use planning were becoming isolated from the broader thrust of the discipline; and it was not clear where the cutting edge would be (Bennett and Wilson 2003, 472).

Building a Centre of Excellence

In Durham Fisher was,

a dedicated expansionist with great entrepreneur flair and wide-ranging ability [and] he was undoubtedly instrumental in creating a large and highly productive department. ... In those days of authoritarian heads, he was the decision-maker who asked for advice but was not consensual and [was] not to be crossed (Clarke 2005, n.p.)

His headship was later described as 'Prussian' (Sillitoe 2018, 259), though others saw only necessary discipline (Anderson 2022, pers. comm.). Fisher was a well organised

academic and he expected the same from his colleagues, for whom he showed a strong pastoral concern. At the time strong focused leadership was neither unique to Durham nor to geography. Kingsley Dunham FRS (1910–2001; Johnson 2002), head of geology at Durham was, for example, equally expansionist and benefited from commercial funding especially from oil companies, whereas there were few funding opportunities for expensive projects in geography and particularly those on human aspects of the discipline.

Photographs of Durham geography graduates since the 1950s show its rapid expansion, especially from the mid 1960s ([Graduation photos – Durham University](#)). ‘Student numbers ... received a boost from the Robbins Report of 1963 (Robbins 1963) ... [and] ... Durham was well placed to take advantage of the new atmosphere since it had ample land resources and for Geography, an expansion minded head in the shape of W.B. Fisher’, supported by like minded university leaders. Fisher chose able subordinates many of whom stayed in Durham for many years, while others were promoted elsewhere or left because they felt ‘constrained’ (Simmons 2020, 9), although there is no evidence that this was due to Fisher’s style of leadership (Anderson 2022, pers. comm.). Some appointees were not at the start of their careers and lacked doctoral and/or postdoctoral experience: Ewan Anderson, ex naval officer, teacher, teacher-trainer and later an expert in geopolitics, was highly successful but others were less so (Simmons 2020, 9–11).

Fisher was slow to adapt to changing academic and social trends in his own research (see below) or in making appointments to permanent posts. The ‘new geography’ of the 1960s and 1970s with its focus on locational analysis and quantification, largely passed Durham by: no appointments were made in these

areas and new curricular material was taught by non specialists (Simmons 2020), but there was sufficient numerical expertise to support graduate students (Anderson 2022, pers. comm.). Although between a quarter to one third of those studying geography in Durham in the mid 1960s were female, all the undergraduates recruited as field assistants for the Malta survey were male and no woman was appointed to a permanent post until 1970 (Schembri *et al.* 2020). Fisher could, however, spot academic potential and, as Bowen-Jones noted:

of the fifteen [geography] students who participated in the 1950s Malta project ten became distinguished academics, one a Permanent Under Secretary [Richardson], and one ... the official Taipan of Hong Kong's treasury (Bowen-Jones 1989, 10).

Fisher also raised the profile of the department by promoting his and his colleagues' work internationally and nationally, and successive annual Warden's Reports detail visits made, external lectures presented and distinguished visitors who called into the department (Gazette 1956; Warden's Report 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957, 1958), but apart from hosting the conferences of the Institute of British Geographers in 1955 (Warden's Report 1955) and the Geographical Association in 1960 (Warden's Report 1960), Fisher had little involvement with British geography at the national level. It was not until 1973 that Royal Geographical Society conferred on him the prestigious Murchison Award and, more surprisingly given his connection with so many agencies of government, he never received any official UK honour.

Fisher was an excellent lecturer, a most diligent tutor who kept in touch with former students, many of whom held him and, indeed still hold him, in the highest regard as a mentor (Ward 2022, pers. comm.). He also acted as a mentor to non-geography students and attended many student social events, often entertaining

those present by improvising on a well known popular tune in the style of various classical composers. He wrote introductions to the annual student *Geographical Society Journal*. That for the 1965 journal captures Fisher's wit and literary style.

Not very long ago, three of us from the Department addressed the British Association in fairly downright terms, taking a firm line that nomadism was a good thing and ought to be encouraged. The Fates, or whatever power controls our possibilities, took us at our word. Since last summer a state of frenzied transhumance and tribal wandering has occurred – some up, some down, some east, others west – as all members of the Department knew only too well. Dons have changed rooms two or three times in a single term, room numbers melted into chaos, with three systems at one time in simultaneous use, and telephone dialling became little better than roulette (not quite Russian, though certain exasperated users came near to it). A fine patriarchal touch sometime emerged as a lecturer led a waiting horde into whatever room seemed for the time being to offer space and relative quiet. Oh, the brave music of a distant drill (Fisher 1965a, 4).

Many geography teachers who were former pupils of Fisher steered their pupils toward the Durham department: Eileen Ward (née Hughes), geography undergraduate 1962–5 and student president, was steered to Durham by her teacher in Bolton, Kenneth Briggs, author of many popular textbooks (Ward 2022, pers. comm.); the present author was steered by his Durham-trained classics master who heard good reports from geography student contemporaries.

As the above quotation makes clear, expansion involved buildings as well as people. Before Fisher's appointment geography shared a new building with mathematics and the science library, but especially from the mid 1960s geographers colonised the whole building for teaching space, laboratories and a library. Fisher's experience in arid zones and with land use and misuse, led him, in many respects a physical geographer *manqué*, to establish Durham as a centre of excellence for pure and applied soil science. He obtained funding for a purpose built soil science laboratory and specialised technical and academic staff. Other laboratories were

equipped for palaeo-environmental reconstruction and other aspects of physical geography. Ever mindful of the value of publicity, in 1965 Fisher arranged for a cabinet minister, Barbara Castle, Minister of Overseas Development, to open the new facilities (Fisher 1965b).

Fisher's Research Career in Durham

Fisher focused on the inter relationships between physical and human geography often within a regional context, with his best selling and much translated text *The Middle East: A Physical, Social, and Regional Geography* (1950), having by 1971 reached its sixth, revised, edition (Fisher 1950, 1971). Although principally a human geographer with a long standing interest in geopolitics, Fisher had also carried out advanced research in the earth sciences (Fish with Dubertret 1943) and particularly in meteorology (Fish, 1945, 1948) and *The Middle East* contains much detailed information, some of it original, on the physical environment of this large region.

Fisher was a geographer of exceptionally wide interests and from the 1940s published across a range of topics including, demography (Fish 1940a), development (Fish 1944), geopolitical issues in the Middle East (Fish 1947), meteorology (Fish 1948), and the plight of people of Indian heritage in South Africa (Fisher 1949). This continued in Durham and included work on historical geography (Fisher with Dickinson 1959), the regional geography of Spain (Fisher with Bowen-Jones 1958), many articles on wine and viticulture for the *Geographical Magazine* (e.g. Fisher 1979a, 1979b); geopolitical aspects of the so called Oil States (Fisher 1980) and, toward the end of his life, geographical perspectives on global environmental concerns (Fisher 1982a; 1982b).

While Fisher's applied investigations avoided criticism of the projects' sponsors and did not suggest policy options, in his own research he was increasingly prepared to proffer opinions, particularly in political geography. He has been unjustly defined as a textbook writer and even a recent history of the Durham department defines him as such, noting wearily that:

undergraduates in any geography department in the 1950s will remember the tedious slog of reading any of the regional geographies of the period, albeit Fisher's *Middle East* was a more difficult one to compile than those on the British Isles or North America (Simmons 2020, 22).

That there was more to Fisher than this was recognised by the well received *Festschrift* by his colleagues, ex colleagues and former students (Clarke and Bowen-Jones 1981). Both the Durham department and the character of geography had changed by 2020 when the departmental history was written, and, in fact, Fisher's Middle East textbook went through numerous editions, was translated into many languages, and lives on in a posthumous edition under the authorship of Ewan Anderson (Anderson 2000). As regional geography fell out of favour, Fisher's work came to look old fashioned to many geographers, though by no means to all outside the subject. Even after his death some scholars of the Middle East still adopted an approach strongly influenced by Fisher and the French regional tradition (e.g. Wagstaff 1985; McLachlan 1987).

Fisher's commitment to regional geography remained although he was *au fait* with new developments. Of the 'new geography' of the 1960s and 1970s he wrote in the preface to the 1971 edition of *The Middle East*:

Quantification and locational theory, the glittering basilisks of modern geography, have so far reared their heads only in a few areas of the Middle East. The Nile Delta offers a near-perfect planer model surface for the followers of Chrystaller (sic), and in fact a few studies of this kind are

emerging. But a sense of personal inadequacy emerges when the present writer surveys the relatively fragmentary nature of many Middle Eastern statistics at this particular juncture; and so mere words, inadequately backed by a few figures often generalized over a period, must perforce still fulfil the tasks that may soon be better performed by locational matrices, lattices and regression series. The situation could very well, and in some respects ought to, change, but for a little longer at least the author can remain in his subjective, existentialist, imprecise fog of the printed word, rather than emerging into the clear, isothermal objective symbolism of punched cards, computer tape and data retrieval based on the soundly based statistics that are now starting to emerge from the Middle East (Fisher 1971, xi–xii).

In one of his last publications Fisher fiercely defends regional geography:

to some geographers, regional differentiation is one of, if not the central elements of the subject: to others, it is an unscientific will o' the wisp that can never inherently have real meaning, except to other, equally deluded geographers – if only because collection of all the requisite data is too demanding. My own position is this. I hold strongly that regional variation can be quantified and assessed, whilst some other aspects, though unquantifiable, remain nevertheless identifiable and highly significant. In short, we cannot ignore the region (Fisher 1982a, 8).

Despite Fisher's spirited justification of the regional approach, the publishers asked Ewan Anderson to drop the regional sections in his new (2000) edition of *The Middle East* while revising and expanding the text on physical themes and political geography, both of which were still considered strengths of the volume (Anderson 2022, pers. comm.).

Spanning the 28 years between the first and seventh editions of the *Middle East* (i.e. 1950–1978) reviews, although critical of some aspects of Fisher's work, were generally favourable and the overall quality of his text was commended by many (Anon 1951a, 1951b; Hoskins 1951; Randall 1951; Anon 1962; Muhly 1973; Brett-Crowther 1980). One negative feature of *The Middle East* and many other publications by Fisher was that referencing was often too sparse to allow sources to be identified, or even to separate factual statements from the author's opinions. The

dearth of publications on the Middle East in 1950 when he wrote the first edition, meant that Fisher had to rely on first hand knowledge or often unpublished reports and make use of his field based observations, but subsequent editions continued to be sparsely referenced.

As in Manchester and Aberdeen, so in Durham Fisher's fertile mind was always open to a wide range of research opportunities, only some of which related to the Middle East. Fisher believed he had a responsibility as one of the few British academics working in the region to inform the profession about new research in the Middle East and he periodically published general reviews of the field covering works which broke new ground (e.g. Fisher 1953b; 1981; Fisher with Bowen-Jones 1974). The most significant trend in Fisher's Middle Eastern research during his Durham years was his engagement with political geography. This began with his published inaugural lecture, 'The Middle East: Then and now' (Fisher 1958) in which he reviews how modes of life which had been stable for centuries were being transformed by factors such as: the region's strategic importance; foreign aid; great power rivalry; the Arab/Israeli dispute; agricultural development and, not least, oil. Many of these trends he returns to in later publications (Fisher 1980; 1981). Several themes which Fisher's perspicaciously identified in the 1950s continue to influence the geography of the region today (Fisher 1980; 1981), but he never appreciated the geopolitical significance of the rise of Islam (Fisher 1958, 13; 1982a). Other Middle Eastern themes addressed by Fisher during his Durham years were: the Iranian environment (Fisher 1968a); the geography of Jordan (Fisher 1972c) and Saudi Arabia (Fisher 1972a; 1972b; 1979c); and the 'oil states' (Fisher 1980). He also returned to

demography, editing with John Clarke a major study of population within the Middle East and North Africa (Clarke with Fisher 1972b).

Fisher's research interests extended beyond the Middle East. Unsurprisingly in a long career a few projects were stillborn. In his application for the Durham readership (Fisher 1953a), he mentions a project on the racial origins of the people of north east Scotland probably inspired by the pioneering research of his mentor Fleure in Wales (e.g. Fleure 1926) and elsewhere, but no publications were forthcoming. Just before he died, Fisher prepared a lengthy chapter on the geographical factors in the development of Chinese science (Clarke 1984), for Joseph Needham's *Science and Civilisation in China*, but this was the only known instance of his contribution's being rejected, in this case because he and Needham disagreed profoundly on content (Blue 2020, 49–50).

In 1958 Fisher once again joined forces with Bowen-Jones to produce a regional text on Spain – a new venture for both men (Fisher with Bowen-Jones 1958). Designed to fill the gap in the literature available to advanced high school and undergraduate university students, *Spain* is a traditional regional geography with a systematic study of physical geography, history, economy and culture constituting the first half of the book, and a series of regional sketches in the second. Some commentators were harsh in their criticism, noting many factual, spelling and other proofreading errors (Anon 1959; Aitken 1959), and one criticised the authors for their 'dismal picture of Spain ... by [the] over-stressing of negative aspects' of Spanish society and economy (Aitken 1959, 253). Because of difficulty accessing information in the 1950s, the authors used 'classic' studies in Spanish and French supplemented by their own fieldwork (Fisher and Bowen-Jones 1958, v). The present

author inclines towards Richard Lawton's view (1959) that this is a useful introductory text on the geography of Spain at the time of the Francoist dictatorship, notwithstanding some carelessness in its production and, to present day sensibilities, too much uncritical environmental determinism.

To the end of his life Fisher continued his wide ranging research. He produced interesting and well written popular pieces for sixth-form students on the geography of viticulture (Fisher 1979a; 1979b) and medical services (Fisher 1974), but his principal late career contribution was in global environmental threats. In 1980 he chaired a meeting in Oxford of an interdisciplinary group of senior academics to consider:

how fragile and vulnerable is our earth, what further carrying capacity has it from the future; how far can its inherent robustness and possibility of regeneration be assisted by human ingenuity; and how far is it possible and necessary to involve the general public in deciding future action – none of them are explicitly answered by any single contributor to the seminar (Fisher 1982b, viii).

Fisher (1982a) suggests that the environment might have become a major feature of his research and writing in retirement had he lived longer. He concludes his contribution to the seminar by sketching geography's possible contributions to environmental questions:

- a. Will increased living standards for the majority of the global population be possible without richer countries making sacrifices?
- b. How will scarcity and cost-mechanisms operate to reduce energy and resource demand?
- c. How can the well established relationships between increased agricultural output and increased demand for energy be reconciled in the world of the future?

- d. How will labour shed by mechanisation be redeployed?
- e. If politics is the 'art of the possible' how is it to cope with the demands of an environmentally based agenda?
- f. Academic expertise across the board will be more important in the future.

Fisher continued to make a valuable academic contribution almost until the end of his long, productive and academically significant life.

Conclusion

Fisher maintained a traditional formality of dress, manner and address for much of his life, being known to his colleagues as 'WBF', to his peers and senior staff at Durham as 'Fisher', and only latterly becoming 'Bill' to his colleagues and research collaborators. The University of Durham archives contain scores of internal memos, often addressed to colleagues of long standing signed simply 'Fisher'. To undergraduate students he was 'Professor Fisher' (personal knowledge): a giant of a man, tall and heavily built; a most effective communicator. Initially a rather intimidating presence, he became for many an academically stimulating and pastorally caring, kind and thoughtful tutor, who was shy, retiring and a very private person. Bill Fisher never married, but remained close to his family, especially to his sister and her children. For the university as a whole and for fourteen years before he retired his communication skills were put to good use in his role of university orator. As John Clarke (1984, 22) noted at his funeral:

Looking like a medieval bishop, he gave full rein not only to his great intellectual range, but also his penchant for innuendo, allusion, humour and hyperbole, frequently reducing the recipients of honorary degrees to tears of joy.

Fisher gave talks to schools throughout his career and other educational initiatives included establishing a shop in Durham which became an urban studies centre and supporting a government policy to allow boarding in state schools. Under his leadership the department took over the youth hostel at Saltburn-by-the Sea on the North Sea coast to run it as an urban studies centre (Anderson 2022, pers. comm.). The hostel closed in 1992. Fisher also lectured to a range of local organisations, which ranged from business groups to miners' welfare meetings.

Bill Fisher was a convivial host, a fine cook, a gourmet and an expert on wines from across the world, whose dinner parties drew a wide range of people representing 'town and gown' to his beautiful home overlooking the incised meander of the River Wear. He invited home not only departmental colleagues, but also his undergraduate and postgraduate students. On the centre right of politics, Fisher had contacts across the political spectrum, often joining friends who were miners at their annual summer gala. Although his parents were protestant nonconformists from outside the Church of England (Laxton 2022, pers. comm.), the adult Fisher was a devout Anglican who enjoyed traditional services held according to the Prayer Book of 1662. He faithfully attended Sunday worship in Durham Cathedral with other senior academics, invariably dressed in his French doctoral robes. Indeed his frequent appearance in academic dress was a colourful part of the Durham scene for many decades.

Fisher died on 29 June 1984, from a brain tumour after only three years of retirement. Obituaries were factual, warm but, with the exception of that by Keith McLachlan (McLachlan 1985), brief (Anon 1984, 1985). His funeral was held at

Durham Cathedral on 6 July 1984. The service was a well attended affair, with a printed Order of Service produced by the Dean and Chapter (Anon 2023) and an oration, which was later reproduced in the annual *University Gazette*, delivered by John Clarke his long standing colleague and friend (Clarke 1984).

Fifty years ago Fisher was widely recognised as a geographer who had both a wide reach and a strong grasp across academic research, teaching and university administration. Today he is a largely a forgotten figure, though in the past twenty years he has been remembered as one of the pioneer British academics who were shaped intellectually by graduate study in France and more generally by *la géographie humaine* (Clout 2005), and/or as one of the many British geographers whose careers were profoundly influenced by service in the Second World War (Balchin 1987; Clout 2003a, 259).

Today Fisher is remembered in Durham in the pen and ink sketch that hangs in the department and which prefaces this memoir, the portrait by the well known Anglo-Hungarian artist, Zsuzsi Roboz (1929–2012), now in university's art collection, which was commissioned by the Graduate Society in 1978 and shows Fisher resplendent in his doctoral robes, and an undergraduate prize named in his honour (McEwan 2023, pers. comm.). But there is little else in Durham to remind people of Bill Fisher's contribution to building up a large and internationally recognised geography department there. The official departmental history discusses his long headship in terms which are far from laudatory (Simmons 2022). Fisher's positive legacy lives on in his influence on those he worked with, taught and in many perspicacious insights he left in his many and varied publications. He is also still a much respected figure outside geography.

In retirement this large-statured man became chair of governors of Durham High School and was described as being ‘like Gulliver in Lilliput’ – a comment which is a fitting comment on Fisher’s life and career (Clarke 1984, 22).

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Chronology

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 1916 | Born 24 Sept in Darwen, Lancashire, UK |
| 1927–34 | Educated at Darwen Grammar School, Lancashire |
| 1934–7 | Department of Geography, University of Manchester |
| 1937 | Graduated BA with first class honours |
| 1937–8 | University of Manchester teacher training |
| 1938 | Graduated with first class teachers' diploma and certificate |
| 1937–8 | Taught in the geography department <i>vice</i> Fleure |
| 1938 | Awarded graduate research scholarship and the David Travelling Scholarship by the University of Manchester |
| 1938–40 | Study at the University of Paris (Sorbonne) |
| 1940 | Docteur de l'Université (Paris) – <i>mention très honorable</i> |
| 1940–46 | War service in the RAF |
| 1944–5 | Taught RAF personnel and at the American University (Beirut) |
| 1946 | Returned to the UK |
| | Changed name by deed poll to 'William Bayne Fisher' |
| | Appointed Assistant Lecturer in Geography at the University of Manchester |
| 1947–1954 | Lecturer in Geography, University of Aberdeen |
| 1950 | Published <i>The Middle East: A Physical, Social and Regional Geography</i> |
| 1951 | Led a major expedition to Libya |

1954–1956	Reader in Geography, Durham Colleges, University of Durham Appointed permanent Head of Department
1955–1964	Vice-Master of Hatfield College at Durham
1957–1981	Professor and Head of Department, Durham Colleges (from 1963 University of Durham)
1962	First Director of the Middle East Centre
1965	Appointed Principal of the Graduate Society
1981–1984	Retirement in Durham
1984	Died 29 June, from a brain tumour
1984	Funeral in Durham Cathedral on 6 July 1984