

## **CAG Award for Scholarly Distinction in Geography**

### **Dr John N. H. Britton**

Dr. John N.H. Britton has served Canadian Geography for forty years as patient mentor, astute supervisor and distinguished economic geographer. Beginning his scholarly work with regional economic studies emphasizing the role of ports and coastal commerce, his subsequent Canadian research shifted towards studies of foreign ownership, manufacturing, and industrial linkages. The geography of industrial linkages, their local multiplier effects and impacts on the long run development of technological capability has been a recurring theme from his PhD onward. In retrospect, this seems entirely appropriate as his PhD supervisor was the distinguished M.J. Wise who authored (among many other works), "*On the Evolution of the Jewellery and Gun Quarters in Birmingham*" (1949), a classic study of localization economies and manufacturing linkages.

Dr. Britton's work has always focused on the 'big' questions with a powerful policy context. His most influential work of the 1970s was *The Weakest Link - A Technological Perspective on Canadian Industrial Underdevelopment*, co-authored with James M. Gilmour. This powerful statement of the perils of an economy dominated by foreign ownership, and its costs in terms of a truncated industrial structure and underdeveloped labour force, put technology and innovation front and centre as the issue in Canadian economic policy. No longer could we be complacent about the poor industrial performance of many Canadian corporations because the solution - promoting innovative new firms - was feasible, and held the promise of long-term returns.

Few Canadian scholars wrote more eloquently or rationally in opposition to free trade as government preoccupation turned to neoliberalism and deregulation in the 1980s. Britton's contributions in such varied venues as *The Canadian Geographer*, *Canadian Public Policy*, *Canadian Journal of Regional Science*, and *Regional Studies*, stand as important benchmarks in the ongoing debate over free trade and its consequences. By contesting some of the mainstream orthodoxy about the functioning of the Canadian economy, his work strongly reflects the Innisian tradition of Canadian political economy and anticipated economic geography's so-called institutional turn of the past decade.

In the 1990s Dr Britton maintained his research interests on the impact of free trade and demonstrated his scholarly virtuosity by initiating a new field of inquiry into the role of innovation and technological development in small industrial enterprises while maintaining his interest in their procurement and supplier links with larger firms at home and abroad. During this period he accepted the challenge of editing the Canadian Association of Geographers' volume on the Canadian economy. Tasked with providing the definitive study of the nation's economic geography, he did a superb job of building and guiding a team of academic geographers: never an easy job! The outcome was the magisterial collection entitled, *Canada and The Global Economy: The Geography of Structural and Technological Change* (1996).

While making these many scholarly contributions, Dr. Britton also served his students and faculty colleagues at the University of Toronto as Chair of the Department of Geography (1978-1988) and then Associate Dean and Vice Dean of the School of Graduate Studies (1991-1997). All the while he was actively supervising many graduate students and leaving a lasting imprint on future generations of economic geographers at the University of Toronto and beyond.

Dr. John N.H. Britton has become the dean of Canadian economic and industrial geographers and an outstanding member of the CAG. We are proud to celebrate his many achievements with the Canadian Association of Geographers' Award for Scholarly Distinction.