

Dedicated scholar of Sikhism

by Roopinder Singh



W.H. MCLEOD came to Punjab, studied and taught here, went back to New Zealand and remained in touch with the land, its people and much more so, with their faith. With his death on July 20, we lost one of the foremost scholars of Sikhism. McLeod was born in New Zealand 1935. He grew up on a farm and his father was active in local politics in Feilding, where he made his home, with his wife Margaret in the last decades of his life.

Hew, as he liked to be called, started his academic journey via evangelism. He had earned his MA from the University of New Zealand in 1955, and as he says in his autobiography, *Discovering the Sikhs: Autobiography of a Historian*. "When I first arrived in India in 1958, I proceeded to the Punjab to take up a teaching appointment. Living in the Punjab I followed my interests from university days which meant that I would take up the history of the area. But what variety of history appealed to me? I devoted my nine years in the Punjab, first to learning the elements of Sikh history and then to pursuing research in the subject. Since then the interest has persisted unabated and doubtless will continue until the day I die."

He learnt Punjabi, delved into manuscripts, interacted with scholars like Professor Ganda Singh and Prof Harbans Singh, and wrote a thesis for which he was given a PhD by the University of London in 1965.

It was published as, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* in 1968. His other prominent books include *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janamsakhis* (1980) and *Who is a Sikh? The Problem of Sikh Identity* (1989), both published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford, *The Chaupa Singh Rahinama* (1987), University of Otago Press, Dunedin, and of course his autobiography which came out in 2004. He faced much controversy when his views clashed with traditions, but he kept at his tasks and produced a formidable body of work.

McLeod re-joined to the History Department of the University of Otago in Duned, New Zealand, where he remained until his retirement in 1998, after which he was appointed emeritus professor. He played a prominent role in establishing Sikh studies as an academic discipline outside India, especially in the USA and Canada, and in his own university. Many of the prominent scholars of Sikhism in the West are either his students, or he played a role in their selection for the positions they hold.

Before his death, New Zealand TV broadcast a documentary, *Hew McLeod: A Kiwi Sikh Historian*, directed by Jasmine Pujji, a Punjabi immigrant and journalist who lives in New Zealand.

Hew was an unfailing kind person, soft-spoken and generous with the encouragement he gave to those who sought his advice. He was indeed scholar extraordinary whose research and scholarship will be useful to scholars and lay people as they seek to understand the Sikh religion and culture. ✍