

(From DNB, note name of author)

Lamb, Hubert Horace (1913–1997), climatologist, was born on 22 September 1913 at 4 Beverley Crescent, St Paul, Bedford, the son of Ernest Horace Lamb (1878–1946) and his wife, Lilian, daughter of the Revd G. H. Brierley. His grandfather was the mathematician [Horace Lamb](#), who published textbooks used by meteorologists, and his father was a professor of engineering. Given that as a young boy Lamb often took tea with his family at the house of Lewis Richardson (who attempted the first-ever numerical prediction of the weather), it might be thought that there was a certain inevitability to his eventual career. Although he ceded to family pressure at Oundle School by abandoning history and languages in favour of the natural sciences, he rebelled at Cambridge University by switching from natural sciences to geography, ending up with a mongrel degree which his father told him he would regret all his life. In fact, it provided the springboard for him to steer climatology out of the sleepy academic backwaters, and encouraged him to question conventional scientific thought. Other early influences which profoundly affected the eventual course of his career were Richardson's Quaker philosophy, which he adopted soon after graduation, and regular conversation with the libertarian Trevor Huddleston (the future bishop), a family friend.

Lamb started employment with the UK Meteorological Office in 1936, claiming modestly that he got the job only because the director had been a student of his grandfather. He soon produced a well-regarded paper on the formation of North Sea fogs but, with war looming, its publication was suppressed because of its potential use to the enemy. The war affected Lamb's career more directly. The outcome of his refusal to work on the meteorology of gas spraying led to a transfer to the Irish meteorological service. There he was charged with producing weather forecasts for the new transatlantic passenger flights, having to rely mainly on information from flight crews in the absence of access to observations. His perfect safety record reflected his deep intuition of weather systems. This insight served him well when he returned to the Meteorological Office in 1946, and he was posted as expedition meteorologist on an Antarctic whaler. His sharp powers of observation allowed him to challenge successfully the received wisdom that the discontinuities between warm and cold waters in the Southern Ocean were invariant. On 7 February 1948 he married (Beatrice) Moira Milligan, with whom he had a son and two daughters.

One of Lamb's outstanding contributions to climatology was published in 1950. It was a study of weather types and natural seasons in Britain, and introduced the Lamb Weather Type classification which gave an enormous impetus to climatological research. About the same time, by good fortune, Lamb was posted to the Meteorological Office's climatology department, which contained probably the most complete and unstudied meteorological archive in the world. He reconstructed monthly atmospheric circulations over Europe and the north Atlantic back to the 1750s, confirming his growing conviction that climate changed on time-scales of significance to modern humankind. His catholic training and his growing questioning stance meant that he was very receptive to the notion of collaborating with scientists from other disciplines. He started to work with botanists, geographers, and historians in his quest to reconstruct past climates. As his interest in climate variations started to extend further back in time, he also started to think about their cause. In 1970 he published the results of a prodigious effort to produce a measure of the volcanic dust in the atmosphere following every single eruption since 1500. His name again entered the scientific literature as others used the Lamb Dust Veil Index as the starting point for their own analyses.

At the beginning of the 1970s Lamb started to feel increasingly uncomfortable over what he

saw as an over-reliance on numerical methods and computers at the Meteorological Office, and left to found the climate research unit at the University of East Anglia. This was a very brave decision so late in his working career, and with all the uncertainties of university funding. Many were dubious about such a venture, and the early years were indeed difficult and stressful. However, before his retirement in 1978, he and his new colleagues in the climate research unit had convinced the remaining doubters about the reality of climate variations on time-scales of decades and centuries. He had also built such a firm base for the unit, and recruited such talented individuals, that over the next twenty-plus years it secured an international reputation for climate research. His period at East Anglia saw the completion of his greatest work: a triumph of scientific synthesis and interpretation, *Climate: Present, Past and Future* appeared in two volumes, published in 1972 and 1977. An irony is that, although the world is now very aware of climate change over decades and centuries, and Lamb did more than any other scientist to establish its acceptance, right to the end of his life he maintained a guarded attitude towards what was known as 'greenhouse gas' warming. He felt that others were too reluctant to consider the full range of other potential causes, and he included members of the climate research unit in that category.

In 1963 Lamb had been awarded a special merit promotion in the Meteorological Office, mainly for his work in the Antarctic. His research was recognized formally through awards such as the Murchison award of the Royal Geographical Society, the Symons gold medal of the Royal Meteorological Society, and the gold medal of the Swedish Geographical Society. He was appointed emeritus professor at the University of East Anglia in 1978. Lamb's modest appearance belied his achievements. He was deeply concerned about the state, and fate, of humankind, and his contribution to climate science has been immense: he is universally recognized as the greatest climatologist of his age. He died on 28 June 1997 at Kelling Hospital, High Kelling, Norfolk, survived by his wife.

Trevor Davies

Sources

T. D. Davies, 'Hubert Lamb', *Weather*, 53/7 (July 1998), 198–201 · *The Guardian* (30 June 1997) · *The Independent* (9 July 1997) · personal knowledge (2004) · private information (2004) · b. cert. · d. cert.

Likenesses

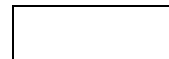
photograph, repro. in *The Guardian* · photograph, University of East Anglia, school of environmental sciences [*see illus.*]

Wealth at death

£227,351: probate, 10 Oct 1997, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

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Trevor Davies, 'Lamb, Hubert Horace (1913–1997)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004
[<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/66263>, accessed 15 March 2010]

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