Journal of Historical Geography xxx (2016) 1–4

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Historical Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhg

Obituary

Xavier de Planhol, 1926–2016

Xavier de Planhol occupied a distinctive place in French geography. He was an assertive character and, one must admit, rather rough. In his own words, he was not 'a kind soul'. His concern for erudition and his originality of thought led him to make fascinating connections across the discipline of geography making his work of great interest to historians, anthropologists, sociologists and linguists as well as to geographers. He made fun of intellectual trends and concern by academics to attract the media and please the general public. Thanks to several of his enlightened books, written without the jargon that has invaded the human sciences in recent decades, he became well known without ever intending to be so. He undertook fieldwork in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, North Africa and Lorraine, always complementing his intuitions with material from his exceptional library, which was partly inherited but also assembled patiently according to his needs and interests throughout his life. It is rare for bibliophiles to use the treasures they amass to enhance their own work but this was a constant concern for Xavier de Planhol. His eclectic tastes led him to collect rather surprising books beyond the field of geography, including nineteenth- and early twentieth-century paperbacks for young readers, on which he was a leading authority. One of his final books, entitled *Initiation aux plats historiés 1865–1939* (2014), was on this topic. He remarked that he acquired a good command of the French language and of spelling and grammar through reading these books. He also collected seventeenth-century baroque novels and even *romans noirs* from the nineteenth century. In his unpublished memoirs he wrote: 'I grew up among books and I hope to die surrounded by them'. He lived a frugal lifestyle, not spending much on clothes or food, in order to devote his income to buying books. Noone remembers having been invited to dine with him in a restaurant or even to have a drink in a café. By contrast, he never declined an invitation to a reception or a dinner in town, be that in Paris or Nancy. His table talk was spiced with rather sharp anecdotes. These were the only moments when he socialized freely. In his later years he drafted his first volume of memoirs covering the first four decades of his life, including his childhood, parents, early career and especially university life before 1968. He entitled it *Un paradis perdu. Ma vieille université*, declaring: 'This no longer exists but I loved it so much that I hope I may be pardoned for combining irony with tenderness as I enumerate its little failings and praise its great virtues'.

Born in Paris on 26 February 1926 to an intellectual couple of the middle bourgeoisie, Xavier Genestet de Planhol was an only child. He experienced an unusual childhood that partially explains his professional and lifestyle choices. His father, René, occupied the paradoxical position of being a man of the right, a monarchist, a follower of Charles Maurras (with whom he corresponded), and an agnostic. Xavier received a religious education from his mother but finally followed his father's ideas without ever joining a political movement. He liked to say that he retained only one virtue from his pious childhood, namely a sense of duty. Because of his father's poor health, his parents decided to move to an immense old family house at Clamecy (Nièvre) when he was four. This was filled with nooks and crannies where he developed a fertile imagination that was nourished by an imposing collection of books. As a man of letters and editor of *La nouvelle lanterne* (a small literary journal), his father decided to be his tutor, with his mother's help. Xavier developed an early taste for learning but this did not educate him in sociability, a fault that would count against him when he put his name forward much later in life as a candidate for the Collège de France and the Académie des Sciences morales et politiques. In his memoirs, he regretted not becoming a boy scout but his father felt that he should not waste time on such childishness. He let slip a confidence that illuminates his life and work: 'I am convinced that belonging to such a liberal organization would undoubtedly have helped to counter a certain tendency towards intellectual autism that I am aware I have suffered from throughout my life'. Having acknowledged this fault, those who suffered from certain harsh aspects of his character might be able to forgive him more easily. It is astonishing that as he described eminent scholars in his memoirs he gently mocked their faults and whimsies without ever thinking for a moment that he displayed them himself. His former doctoral students, now retired university professors, like to joke about his incisive rejoinders and ferocious turn of speech. However, his interventions in doctoral examinations left disagreeable memories for the candidates and their supervisors. He never tried to make friends through leniency.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2016.08.011
0305-7488

Young Xavier made remarkable progress and when he reached six years of age his father judged that it was no longer necessary to give him exercises in dictation. Throughout his life he would be extremely sensitive to errors in spelling, syntax and especially punctuation. He made a written summary of everything he read each day and thereby acquired a vast and eclectic range of classical knowledge in which geography had a place. As 'a child who loved maps and engravings', he devoured atlases, travellers' tales (real and imaginary) and magazines such as *Le Tour du Monde* and *Le Journal des Voyages*, both of which ceased publication in 1914. This helps to explain his interest in the nineteenth century and in historical geography. He did not go to school or meet young people of his own age until 1939 when he joined the final year of the *lycée* in Moulins to prepare the first part of the school-leaving examination (*baccalauréat*). In 1940 he moved to the philosophy class of the college in Clamecy and at the age of fifteen and half became the youngest holder of the *baccalauréat* in France, thanks to a dispensation for age. Then, in September, he acquired a second *baccalauréat* qualification in elementary mathematics. He entered the special class at the Lycée Louis le Grand in Paris, with a view to entering the Ecole Normale Supérieure, but he discovered that he was not made for intellectual speculations in philosophy. He noted: 'I needed the real world. I returned, painlessly, to my first inclinations in history, backed up by geography'. His exam results were not sufficient for entry to the ENS and he enrolled instead at the Sorbonne to study history and geography, in which he flourished. At the Institut de Géographie he was taught by Emmanuel de Martonne whom he judged to be 'despotic but very enlightened', and whom he admired for 'his great freedom of discussion and alertness; his attention to questions and willingness to admit his doubts and to acknowledge contradictions; and his openness to hypotheses and encouragement of new approaches. He was a prestigious head of school'. This portrait conforms to what he himself would become when he was a professor.

After researching a *diplôme d'études supérieures* (equivalent to master's level) on the geomorphology of the Nivernais area, supervised by André Cholley, he prepared for the fiercely demanding *agrégation* examination for those intending to teach in secondary education or at university level. He passed in 1946 at the tender age of twenty years and a few months. He was posted to teach at the Prytanée militaire (academy) at La Flèche, but he did not put down roots. He decided to undertake research in the Middle East and one year later received a grant to study at the Institut Français d'Archéologie in Istanbul, in order to prepare a doctoral thesis on Turkey. He had only a vague idea about the country but had long dreamed about it thanks to the Kurdish wife, daughter of a pacha, of one of his uncles whom he met in his youth at Clamecy. He duly presented his thesis in 1956, when he was thirty. It was entitled 'De la plaine pamphylienne aux lacs pisidiens: Nomadisme et vie paysanne'. He wrote: 'The same work, matured and written five years later, would have been much better …. It was not the "*crème de la crème*" but it was "*crème*" nonetheless'.

During his years of research he was inspired by the work of Roger Dion, Pierre Gourou, Jean Despois, Robert Capot-Rey, Pierre Birot, Orlando Ribeiro and some non-geographers such as Fernand Braudel. He was caustically critical of some writing in French geography, especially when it was not based on fieldwork or first-hand enquiry, or toed a particular political line. He never fell into that trap, despite a reputation that some of his enemies put around. He certainly had convictions but he was able to hold in high esteem a certain number of scholars who did not share them.

In 1951, he returned to France to become André Cholley's *assistant* at the Sorbonne and found himself having to mark large quantities of student work each week. In 1956, when his thesis was not quite finished, he was appointed to teach at the University of Nancy, where he remained for fifteen years, becoming full professor and supervising much research in agrarian geography. He produced impressive work on the origins of open fields, especially in Lorraine, and on the villages and houses of that province. This brought him into contact with British, German and Scandinavian scholars, some of who joined him on the Colloquium on Agrarian Structures and Rural Landscapes that he convened at Nancy with historian Jean Schneider in September 1957. He enjoyed the time he spent in Lorraine but, to the great displeasure of successive faculty deans, he never took up residence in Nancy, spending only one night each week because of the absence of a library with the erudite works necessary for an orientalist. Undoubtedly this choice also reflected his concern to keep his life private.

Xavier de Planhol was elected professor at the Sorbonne in 1969, just after the fragmentation of the old Institut de Géographie into three parts, following the decision of Edgar Faure to create seven multi-disciplinary universities in Paris in place of one. This fragmentation also reflected the pernicious political atmosphere in French universities that made it difficult for professors of different political sensibilities to work together. In these circumstances, he participated in the creation of the department of geography in the new university known as Paris IV and which its first president, Alphonse Dupront, would name Paris-Sorbonne, remaining faithful to the great academic traditions of Paris that the revolutionaries of May 1968 wished to trample underfoot. Jean Delvert, Pierre Birot, Pierre Rognon, André Guilcher, Aimé Perpillou and Pierre Pédelaborde shared a vision of research and teaching that was far removed from the spirit of 1968. Jean-René Vanney and Paul Claval joined them soon after. Following Delvert, Xavier de Planhol became director of the Unité d'Enseignement et de Recherche de géographie (geography department) from 1977 to 1981. For a quarter century, he also taught the geography of the Turkish and Iranian realms at the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales.

The published work of Xavier de Planhol is important not only in volume but also in relevance and originality. Most of his books will be referred to and held in high esteem for a long time, even though

Please cite this article in press as: J.-R. PitteObituary, Journal of Historical Geography (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2016.08.011