

## EMERY, FRANK VIVIAN (1930-1987), historical geographer

**Name:** Frank Vivian Emery  
**Date of birth:** 1930  
**Date of death:** 1987  
**Spouse:** Muriel Patricia Emery (née Male)  
**Child:** Caroline Mary Emery  
**Child:** Susan Elisabeth Emery  
**Parent:** Bronwen Myfanwy Emery (née Williams)  
**Parent:** William Emery  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** historical geographer  
**Area of activity:** History and Culture; Science and Mathematics  
**Author:** John Langton

Frank Emery was born 15 June 1930 at his parents' home in Mount Street, Gowerton, Glamorganshire. His mother Bronwen Myfanwy (née Williams) was in Merthyr Tydfil in 1897. His father, William ('Bill') Emery (1897-1962), was born in Pentrebach, Merthyr Tydfil, Glamorgan.

At the time of Frank's birth, he was a professional cricketer: a right-handed batsman and right-arm medium paced bowler who in the early 1920's played first class cricket for Glamorgan and Wales, including matches against Lancashire, Nottinghamshire, and the MCC at Lord's.

Frank was brought up and went to school in Gowerton. Much of his boyhood was spent walking in the landscape of rural Gower to look beyond the obtrusive effects of coal mining in his immediate vicinity to discover Iron Age and Roman forts and signs of Anglo-Norman settlement and Parliamentary enclosure, and to speculate about how it had come to be as it was. In leisure hours during his army service, he could be discovered 'drawing neat sketch maps of Gower, apparently as a labour of love', in the words of his friend, John Andrews. Emery wrote about Gower intermittently throughout his career: in eleven articles in the *Journal of the Gower Society* (1950, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1954a, b and c, 1969b, 1970b, 1974b and 1975c); in his undergraduate dissertation, which won prizes from Oxford University and the Royal Geographical Society in 1952; in *The National Library of Wales Journal* (1956, 1957 and 1958); in *The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1965), and in a posthumously published chapter in *Settlement and Society in Wales* (1989).

To Emery, the Gower landscape was, like all others, much more than scenery to be enjoyed as an aesthetic experience and explicated as an academic exercise. 'Beautiful, quiet little Gower straddles the sharp line of cultural turbulence where Celtic Atlantic Europe and Continental Europe faced each other uncomprehendingly for a thousand years'. And evidence of this is visible, to those with the skill and sensitivity to see it, in Gower's now placid landscape. This aspect of Gower, like its scenic beauty, inspired in Emery a life-long intellectual curiosity.

The subject of his prize-winning undergraduate dissertation was 'The English Settlement in Peninsular Gower', and his paper of 1957 was concerned with contacts between South Wales and the south-west peninsula of England in the nineteenth century. During the 1980s, Emery greatly developed his lecture courses and seminars in Oxford on the geography of language (with an emphasis on Welsh, still spoken to the north of Gower), and had he lived for longer he would undoubtedly have published much more on this subject than the section of his paper in the *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1965) and the paper he wrote jointly with Paul White in *Area* (1976a).

Emery was conscripted to do his national service on leaving school in 1947, training with the Royal Army Educational Corps at Bodmin before going to teach academic subjects (including geography) as a sergeant at the Army Apprentices' School, Chepstow (which was, in fact, at Beachley).

After demobilisation in 1949, Emery went to Jesus College, Oxford on a State Scholarship; Gowerton Grammar School was given a day's holiday to celebrate this achievement. At Jesus College he was tutored by J. N. L. Baker, which must to some extent have been responsible for the development of his profoundly scholarly interest in the writings of early chorographers and the work of the eminent naturalist, archaeologist and linguist, [Edward Lhuyd](#). Besides his love of the landscape itself, Emery felt a strong affinity with these men who were, like himself, 'moved by their sense of locality and a zeal for making things known', as he described Robert Gordon and Robert Sibbald in 1958.

After gaining a First Class honours degree in Geography in 1952, when he already had two publications to his name, Emery began work on his postgraduate thesis on British regionalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was awarded

the degree of B.Litt. in 1955, when he also took his M.A. degree. (It was unusual at that time to submit a thesis for a doctoral degree, although Emery's B.Litt. examiners considered that his thesis was worthy of an even higher degree.) After only one year of full-time research, he was appointed Assistant Lecturer in Geography at the University College of Swansea, where he was promoted to a full lectureship in 1956, and where he met Muriel P. ('Pat') Male (born Newport, Monmouth, 1928) whom he married in Monmouthshire in 1956. Emery was proud to be the son-in-law of 'Ossie' Male (schoolteacher, born Newport, Monmouth 1893), rugby full-back for Cross Keys, Pontypool and Cardiff, and 1921-28 for the Welsh national team, which he captained in 1928.

Emery returned to Oxford as a Departmental Demonstrator and Lecturer in Geography at St Peter's Hall in 1957. In 1959 he was appointed to the newly created Lectureship in Historical Geography at Oxford and felt privileged that his was the only post in the School of Geography at Oxford to carry such a specific designation. A few months before his father's death in 1962, he was elected Fellow and Tutor in Geography at St Peter's, which had recently become a fully-fledged college of Oxford University. Pat was a schoolteacher in Oxford, where their children Caroline and Susan were born, while Frank continued to occupy his university and college posts until his death in 1987.

Emery was fully involved in the administration and everyday life of both his department and his college. He always served without demur in institutional offices and on committees and examining boards. His willingness meant that he was asked to do so more than most. Perhaps, too, his ability to remain outside the tangles of abstruse argument and dissolve them into laughter was as valued objectively as it was relished subjectively. An inevitable consequence of Emery's full involvement in administration and his facility always to be amused and amusing was that his colleagues were never fully aware of the extent of the time he spent on teaching, research and writing, or of the commitment, passion and meticulousness with which he engaged in all of them. He customarily lectured and gave seminars and tutorials on sources and methods in historical geography; the historical geography of England, 1650-1800; origins of and changes in British landscapes; recent changes in the upland landscapes of Britain and France; the geography of language; the historical geography of southern Africa, and the exploration and partition of Africa. Much as he evidently greatly enjoyed classroom teaching, no one who accompanied him on one of the many field excursions he contributed to the Oxford geography course could doubt that that was the kind of teaching most congenial to him. The highlight of many geography undergraduates' learning experience in Oxford (often much to their surprise) was their visit with Emery to the deserted village of Hampton Gay.

The kind of geography taught at Oxford, with its strong emphasis on the landscape as a synoptic expression of the relationship between people and the physical environment, and its large component of field work, was undoubtedly both congenial and inspiring to Emery. It blended smoothly with the zealous pursuit of scholarship inculcated by J. N. L. Baker and the enthusiasms developed in the environment of his boyhood to produce the preoccupations expressed in his publications. What is remarkable about a list of his writings is not simply its length, nor even the range of the topics that catalyzed around his love of landscape and its history, but the fact that no area of research was ever abandoned as the range of his interests expanded. Once he was fascinated by a subject, Emery could not think of letting it go - an eloquent testimony to the depth of the personal devotion he brought to his work.

After moving permanently to Oxford, Emery developed the detachment and distance that added a fascination with the landscape of Wales as a whole to his previous interests. His first book was *Wales*, the second volume of Longman's *The World's Landscapes Series* (1969a). It displays to the full the thorough scholarship, humanity and verve that characterized all Emery's writings and made them both popular with the general public and authoritative amongst academics. His *Wales* immediately became the standard reference on the Welsh landscape and established his reputation as the foremost authority on that subject, on which he contributed chapters to two subsequent books (1972 and 1989). His life-long interest in [Edward Lhuyd](#) reached its culmination in the book *Edward Lhuyd F.R.S. (1660-1709)* (1971a), although he wrote another five articles about [Lhuyd's](#) researches. His publication of work on the landscape of the Oxford region - inspired, no doubt, by teaching duties as well by his innate responsiveness to the landscape in which he lived - began in 1964. Again, it culminated in a book which is both widely read and authoritative. *The Oxfordshire Landscape* (1974a) was again followed by further articles on the same subject, the last in 1984.

From the beginning, Emery was fascinated by how landscapes express the changing material requirements of societies. His first publications in national journals were about the farming system that created the landscape of West Glamorgan at the turn of the seventeenth century. The works by which he is best known to historians are probably his chapters on farming in Wales in the volumes of the *Agrarian History of England and Wales* (ed. H. P. R. Finberg (1967) and Joan Thirsk (1984a)). Although, in the spirit of the Aberystwyth and Oxford Schools of geography which he admired and exemplified, Emery completely eschewed methodological writing, his acute awareness of methodological issues is illustrated by his much-cited article on the diffusion of clover cultivation in Wales (1975c). Again, this research interest continued until his death. During his last few years, most of the long hours he spent (always at the same favourite desk) in Duke Humfrey's Library were devoted to the painstaking analysis of Oxfordshire probate inventories in search of patterns of innovation in Oxfordshire farming in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

For the last decade or so of his life, the majority of Emery's publications, comprising two books and ten scholarly articles, were concerned with the landscape of South Africa, and particularly that of Natal as perceived by the first white men to encounter it. He returned in 1979, 1984 and 1985 after a visiting lectureship at the University of Natal at Pietermaritzburg in 1967/68. As in Oxfordshire, it was impossible for Emery not to become enthralled by the landscape in which he was living, or not to speculate upon its provenance. Undoubtedly, further piquancy was due to the strangeness of that landscape compared with those of Britain, and to the fact that many of the first Europeans to experience it were Welshmen: clergymen, such as the [Rev. John David Jenkins](#), but most particularly the soldiers of the 24th Regiment of Foot, who fought in the Zulu War and (after being renamed as the 1st and 2nd Regiments of The South Wales Borderers in 1881) in the Boer War, to whose museum at Brecon Emery gave tremendous support. Their letters home from southern Africa provided Emery with an incomparable store of information on how others before him had perceived and responded to their early encounters with this alien landscape, and how they had acted to gain control over and put their own imprint upon it.

Emery died on 6th October 1987 near Hampton Gay. His remains were cremated in Oxford, and a memorial service was held at St. Peter's College on 21st November, 1987. The diversity of interests represented in his five books and more than fifty scholarly articles, the elegance and wit with which he wrote, and the deep commitment to the study of landscape which shines through all his work, will guarantee Emery a large readership for many years to come. He is remembered with admiration and respect by both the general public and the scholarly community: not only, as he would modestly have wished, as one of those people who have been most 'moved by their sense of locality and a zeal for making things known', but also as one of those who have done most to inspire these qualities in others.

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## Author

John Langton

## Sources

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See further, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, ns., 13, no.2 (1988), 240-44

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