Tribute to Dr Roger Tomlinson by Professor Gordon Ewing, Chair, Dept. of Geography on the occasion of Dr. Tomlinson officially naming the Roger Tomlinson Laboratory for Geographic Information and Environmental Analysis in the Department of Geography, McGill University, May 31, 2006.

It is my privilege to welcome Roger Tomlinson back to the Department of Geography after an absence of 45 years. And what changes there have been in Roger’s academic life and in geography during that period. I dare say it may be hard for him to believe how his ideas have influenced both our discipline and others.

If we played word association and asked each of you what springs to mind when someone mentions GIS, many of you might mention ESRI or ArcView or even Google Earth. But if you go to Google and type “father of GIS”, page after page after page of references cite one person, Roger Tomlinson. His impact has been so great that in the past decade his contributions have been recognized by many organizations and institutions.

As early as 1988 he won the Murchison Award of the Royal Geographical Society for developing GIS. In 1996 he was awarded the “GIS World” Lifetime Achievement Award. The next year he became the first recipient of the ESRI Lifetime Achievement Award. He has received medals from the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, the Canadian Association of Geographers and the Association of American Geographers. More recently, he was made a fellow of University College London, and five years ago he was made a member of the Order of Canada by the Governor General for "changing the face of geography as a discipline." You could say that he truly has put geography on the map!

I always find it interesting to ask how people like Roger got started in their distinguished careers. If you read one of his recent books “Thinking about GIS”, you’ll see he dedicates it to his geography teacher at Newmarket Grammar School in Suffolk. From school he wisely enlists in the RAF in 1951 to do his National Service, and is a pilot for three years. This gives him the chance, rare in these days, to see landscapes from the air. Flying a few thousand feet above the land has to be one of the most stimulating experiences for all geographers. Given the stimulus of an inspiring geography teacher and aerial views of landscapes from the cockpit, the
natural next step is to read geography at university. But, in addition to a B.Sc. in geography, he simultaneously studies photogrammetry for a year, and for good measure takes 2 of the 3 years of the geology degree. So we can begin to see that he is destined to do something involving landscapes.

Like many Brits at that time, he then comes to Canada in 1957 to do a graduate degree. He chooses McGill and geomorphology, and is supervised by the man who until his death four years ago was the dean of geography in Canada, another expatriate Brit, the illustrious Ken Hare, who himself made a tremendous impression on those he taught and supervised. After Roger spends a year at McGill’s Sub-Arctic Research Station at Knob Lake (Schefferville) and time in the field in the Kaumajet Mountains in northern Labrador, his pace of life becomes more hectic, not least because he’s become a father! He simultaneously completes a geology degree at Acadia, becomes an Assistant Prof. in geology there, while having already joined the aerial survey company, Spartan Air Services in Ottawa in 1959. Oh, and in the meantime, after being suitably prodded by Brian Bird, he completes his M.Sc. degree in 1961.

After four years at Spartan, where he is now head of its computer mapping division, he moves in 1964 to the federal government and leads the development of the Canada Geographic Information System which is born in 1967 and used to analyse the seven layers of environmental data collected by the Canada Land Inventory for rural land use planning.

So GIS is born in Canada’s Centennial year in the nation’s capital, and then showcased in its greatest city at Expo ’67! If this was part of a novel, you’d say it was too far fetched.

In 1968 at the ripe old age of 34, he becomes chair of the IGU Commission on Geographical Data Sensing and Processing, with older luminaries on the committee including the likes of Waldo Tobler and David Simonett.

Two years later in October, 1970 in Ottawa he chairs the UNESCO/IGU First Symposium on Geographical Information Systems, bringing together researchers from Europe, the USA and Canada.

In Roger’s Summary of Proceedings he notes that the terms “geographic information systems” and “environment information systems” are used synonymously. Here at McGill we manage to have both a Department of
Geography and a School of Environment. I won’t say any more on that topic! But if you look at the full title of this lab, you’ll see it’s the Roger Tomlinson Lab for Geographic Information and Environmental Analysis. Surely this embodies the spirit of Roger’s remarks in 1970 and the purpose of the discipline called geography.

In his opening address he tells the assembled delegates that they face a unique situation in that the science of geography may have reached a turning point because of parallel developments in the science of data processing. And he goes on to say that while all sciences can benefit from the capabilities offered by data processing, geography with its focus on the whole surface of the globe and the vast array of environmental data, can use these capabilities to best advantage. But, he says, “I’m not simply referring to the rivers and forests and natural countryside so beloved of pollution control activists. Our environment is the whole living space of mankind, with man himself, his creations and his actions as important elements within it.” Here speaks a true geographer.

Since these early days of GIS, Roger Tomlinson has continued to be a leader among thinkers in the field. But there’s one unusual feature about such a leadership role. We’re used to thinking of university-based academics playing this role. But for the past forty-five years Roger has not been a university-based academic. He’s been a consultant geographer earning his keep from contract projects, which often narrows horizons and engenders intellectual avoidance of big issues. Nothing can be further from the truth in Roger’s case. Not only is he the father of GIS. He has also stuck around and ensured that it grew up to be a mature adult!

I would now like to ask Roger to officially name this new lab, but before doing so, please join me in saluting Roger’s lifetime of achievement in geography and GIS.