

1 The beginning and the end

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To understand the progress of geography in Britain between 1918 and 1945 it is important to appreciate what was the state of the subject at the beginning and at the end of the period under review. However 'new' geography may sometime seem to us in the twentieth century, certainly as a university discipline, it is a subject with a long and honourable history. Its evolution over the centuries has been studied by many writers, both in general terms and in detail, and it is unnecessary to repeat this story even in summary form. Perhaps it is enough to remind ourselves that geography has long been known and practised in Britain. We know, for example, that as long ago as 1187, Giraldus Cambrensis, a Welsh scholar in Oxford, read aloud his *Topography of Ireland* for three whole days in 1187. Nearly four hundred years later, and again in Oxford, Richard Hakluyt, a Student of Christ Church, gave lectures on geography and subsequently produced the series of volumes called *The Principall navigations, voyages and discoveries of the English nation*. Indeed the view of J. N. L. Baker is that the progress of academic geography in Britain during 'the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is largely concerned with the University of Oxford which during that period led the way in geographical study and accomplishment, and produced one work of outstanding merit' (Nathanael Carpenter's *Geographie Delineated Forth in Two Bookes, containing the Sphaericall and Topicall Parts thereof*, published in Oxford in 1625). During the later eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century geographical ideas played an important role in the work of explorers from various parts of the British Isles – James Cook, for example, with his extensive voyages in the Pacific and elsewhere, and David Livingstone, the great missionary traveller in Africa. Significantly the Royal Geographical Society, in large measure an extension of the African Association established during the latter years of the

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eighteenth century, was founded in 1830, and one of its first Secretaries, Captain Alexander Maconochie, was given the title of Professor of Geography at University College London between 1833 and 1836 (Ward 1960). Also during the nineteenth century a number of important books on geography were published – perhaps of special influence was Mary Somerville's *Physical Geography*, which first appeared in 1848 (Baker 1948).

The growth of the subject as an academic discipline worthy of study in universities matters most to our understanding of the state of geography between the World Wars of the twentieth century, in which century the most important developments have been concentrated. Much of this progress can be traced back to the publication in 1886 of Scott Keltie's report on geography, commissioned by the Royal Geographical Society (Keltie 1886). Among the consequences of this survey was the interest shown in both Oxford and Cambridge, with much support and encouragement (financial and otherwise) from the Royal Geographical Society. Of special significance was the appointment of H. J. Mackinder to a Readership in Oxford in 1887, with comparable developments in the University of Cambridge. The growth of the subject in schools was also marked by the founding, by a group of schoolmasters, mainly in public schools, of the Geographical Association in 1893.

But although Oxford and Cambridge had the opportunity of leading the field in the development of geography, some events elsewhere were more significant, or at least of equal importance, such as the appointment of L. W. Lyde, a classicist, to a Chair of Economic Geography at University College London in 1903, and the arrival of P. M. Roxby, an Oxford-trained historian, in the University of Liverpool to encourage teaching in the subject. Roxby's presence there led on to the creation of the John Rankin Chair of Geography in 1917 at the same time as the Honour School of Geography in the Faculty of Arts – the first of its kind in any British university – was introduced (Steel 1967: 5). In the following year the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, introduced honours schools in both Arts and Science, this coinciding with the appointment of H. J. Fleure to the new Gregynog Chair of Geography and Anthropology. Very shortly afterwards honours courses were established in some of the colleges in the University of London where in 1922 Sir Halford Mackinder and J. F. Unstead were elected to Professorships of Geography at the London School of Economics and Birkbeck College respectively. Much was happening, therefore, in the geographical world in the period immediately following the Armistice of 1918, and geography was clearly well poised for development and expansion.

Three of the contributors to this volume have concerned themselves in various ways with the state of the subject from 1918 onwards. T. W. Freeman's *A History of Modern British Geography*, published in 1980, includes two chapters specifically on the inter-war period as well as a chapter on 'Geography in war and peace' (Freeman 1980); H. C. Darby has an essay on 'Academic geography in Britain, 1918–1946' in the special jubilee number of the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, published in 1983 (Darby 1983). D. R. Stoddart has recently published his *Geography and its History* (Stoddart 1986), and in it he presents an interesting view of the subject from the point of view of someone who was born only a few months before the outbreak of war in 1939. It is superfluous to repeat what these colleagues have written in recent years. It is enough to underline that in 1918 there were more departments than there had ever been before though most of these were young, and such honours schools as there were were as yet untried, although they speedily attracted a fair number of undergraduates. Other universities were also showing an increased interest in the subject though all the geography departments in existence were small with minimal resources in terms of physical space, staff, both academic and ancillary, equipment and resources. And despite the headstart given to Cambridge and Oxford thirty years before, there was still no Cambridge Tripos and no Oxford Honour School. War-time activities of geographers had been important although the number was small (infinitesimally so in comparison with the considerable numbers of trained geographers who were available during the Second World War). Important work was done by the Section of the Naval Intelligence Division of the Admiralty, under the direction of H. N. Dickson (a lecturer in Oxford from 1899 until he became Professor of Geography at University College Reading in 1906), and some fifty handbooks and manuals on different countries together with about 130 short geographical reports were produced. But the nature and scope of this output can hardly be compared with the publication of Geographical Handbooks during the Second World War though then there was, of course, an army of geographers and others to undertake the work compared with the small group responsible for this similar activity in the First World War. This, then, was the situation in which geography embarked upon its course of progress during the inter-war period, and it is against this background that many of the essays in this volume should be seen. Several of the authors have written with first-hand experience of the problems of small departments, broad syllabuses and very meagre resources. That so many of the essays can indicate remarkable progress over the decades that followed the end of the War in 1918 is noteworthy

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and is in itself a justification for a volume of this nature. It was a modest beginning to a new chapter in the history of British geography.

Just as the post-war period was beginning, Cambridge introduced its Geographical Tripos and in Oxford Professor C. H. Firth produced a forceful pamphlet, 'The Oxford School of Geography', which argued the case for an honours school. These two developments suggested ways forward for the subject though in fact it was only some years later that there were really significant developments. The Cambridge Chair of Geography was not established until 1928, and that in Oxford, coinciding with the introduction of an Honour School, only in 1931. There was an interesting development in the use of geographers in 1918 when A. G. Ogilvie was sent to the Geographical Section of the General Staff, in which capacity he went to Versailles as a member of the British Delegation. Among his activities was a survey of southern Macedonia, and he saw the task of the map makers at the Versailles conference as very much the delineation of boundaries that would be least likely to make trouble later. It is generally felt that the fact that the principles underlining the territorial decisions of the Peace Conference were partly geographical was largely due to the work of the American 'Inquiry' which was centred at the house of the Geographical Society in New York.

Many of the essays in this volume highlight the developments in different places and in different branches of the subject but it is appropriate here to refer to some of the peaks for the subject as a whole that occurred during the twenties and thirties. Thus, in 1928 the International Geographical Union held its conference in Cambridge, and a volume was produced under the editorship of A. G. Ogilvie, *Great Britain: essays in regional geography*. Many years later this volume was described as 'a testimony to the Britain and to the geographers of its period' (Mitchell 1962: xi); and H. C. Darby has commented (1983) that 'the mere fact that the Congress met in Britain at the time sustained and invigorated the growing subject. There were 21 departments of geography in existence when the book was being prepared, and another three were added before the year 1928 was over. It had been a fine summer, and when the geographers returned to their universities they did so with their heads held higher than before' (Darby 1983: 16). In 1930 the Royal Geographical Society celebrated its Centenary, and suggested (despite the economic difficulties of the time) various ways in which it might develop in the coming years and H. R. Mill produced his valuable record of the Society (Mill 1930). Shortly afterwards an Essay Prize was established to encourage undergraduates reading geography in British universities to write with a view to publication in the *Geographical Journal*. The Geographical

Association was increasing its membership quite considerably, and perhaps there was significance in the changing of the title of its journal from *The Geographical Teacher* to *Geography* in 1926. In 1933 a small group of academic geographers came together to start, in a very modest way, the Institute of British Geographers, with but seventy-three founder members but which, a little over half a century later, has a membership exceeding 2,000 (Steel 1984).

All in all the situation in 1939 was vastly different from that of 1918. There were departments of geography in nearly every British university and the number of sixth-form pupils studying the subject had increased enormously. There were more potential recruits for geography in universities, and research prospects were increasing in some universities. A large number of volunteers who had graduated in geography were working for the Land Utilisation Survey of Great Britain under the general direction of L. D. Stamp – undoubtedly one of the major achievements of the subject during the years between the wars (Stamp 1948). Significantly there are references to the work of the Survey in a number of the essays that follow. There were also many geographers whose skills acquired in the university equipped them for service to the nation during the Second World War both in the Services and in the Ministry of Town and Country Planning which was created in 1943 and depended in large measure upon professional geographers for its first members.

If this was the beginning of the inter-war period, what can be said of the position of geography at the end of it? All the contributions reveal in one way or another the growth of certain departments or the enhancement of the subject in particular universities or the progress made in certain branches of the subject as well as in geography as a whole. Some individuals play a very special role in these developments, and it is noteworthy that some names occur repeatedly throughout the volume, often quoted by more than one writer – in alphabetical order J. N. L. Baker, R. O. Buchanan, H. J. Fleure, P. M. Roxby, L. Dudley Stamp, Eva G. R. Taylor and S. W. Wooldridge, to mention but a selection of the pioneers of the subject as we know it and profess it today. Interestingly and significantly each of these geographers graduated in another discipline – this in complete contrast to the writers of these essays, all of whom had geography as the dominant, if not the exclusive, subject in their initial degrees.

Shortly after the end of the Second World War one of these pioneer geographers, Eva Taylor, wrote of the sudden rise in geographical prestige which occurs in war time when ‘geographical intelligence of every kind ... becomes vital’ (Taylor 1947). Geographers certainly played a

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prominent part in many fields of national life during the period 1939–45. There was never a comprehensive review of the war-time work done by British geographers (Buchanan 1951; Wilson 1946) though very belatedly the Royal Geographical Society is attempting (in 1985–7) to compile such a record by drawing on the knowledge of those geographers who were involved and who are still alive in the mid-eighties. The fact that geographers could contribute as they did in so many different spheres, both military and non-military, resulted from the training that they had received through the patient and painstaking work done in individual departments and by individual geographers during the years between the wars that are surveyed in this volume. The geographers helped to lay the foundations for future development, providing the springboard, as it were, for the quite remarkable expansion of geography in the universities immediately after the Second World War. Nevertheless, while stressing the importance of what had been accomplished between the wars, one must not under-estimate the achievement of those who worked so hard immediately after the end of hostilities. Perhaps it is not inappropriate to quote here from the history of the Institute of British Geographers:

The War had destroyed (or at least very seriously disrupted) much of the university system as it existed in Britain in 1939, so that many universities were in considerable disarray, and it would have been easy for them, and their much depleted staffs, to have concentrated wholly on the teaching of the greatly increased number of students, including many returned ex-servicemen, to the total exclusion of research activities and the building up of their disciplines. Departments of geography, never large in the inter-war period, had lost many of their staff. (Steel 1984: 23)

Moreover this remarkable recovery of geography, in both teaching and research, had to be achieved without the help of a number of geographers in academic appointments who had become civil servants in the Ministry of Town and Country Planning. Again, to quote from the history of the IBG: ‘in the immediate aftermath of the war, it was by no means clear what was likely to happen to disciplines such as geography, and the chaos in universities as ex-servicemen flooded back to complete their university courses, or, with the help of ex-service grants, to begin their higher education, created many problems and uncertainties in universities throughout the country’ (Steel 1984: 24).

Geography did in fact survive the immediate problems of the post-war years. The Institute of British Geographers was re-created, the membership of the Geographical Association increased very markedly and included a fair number of geographers who were not schoolteachers.

The Royal Geographical Society flourished and very considerably extended its activities. A reconstituted National Committee for Geography, with professional geographers in a majority for the first time ever, was established under the aegis of The Royal Society. The number of undergraduates reading geography rose remarkably and university departments increased in number, in size and in quality. It was at this stage that the authors of this volume began to be elected to professorships, and in the following years all the senior authors, apart from the one who was a civil servant, became holders of Chairs of Geography in a variety of universities. It was these departments in the majority of British universities that provided the seed-bed of fertile soil in which new ideas that came from elsewhere – notably the USA and Sweden – were developed, very rapidly in some places, rather more slowly elsewhere and sometimes with considerable scepticism if not positive resistance.

That story of post-war growth and the great expansion of geography during the sixties lies outside the scope of this volume, and is better written by those who are still active in the subject and who have experienced all of this development at first-hand, often as students, then junior staff members and later as holders of key senior posts where they have been very influential, in universities and polytechnics, during the forty years since the end of the Second World War.

At the beginning of the twentieth century H. R. Mill wrote ‘we sometimes hear of the New Geography but . . . it is more profitable to consider the present position of geography as the outcome of the thought and labours of an unbroken chain of workers, continuously modified by the growth of knowledge, yet old in aim, old even in the expression of the ideas that we are apt to consider most modern’ (Mill 1901: 701). Much more recently Peter Gould in his *The Geographer at Work* (1986) has discussed whether geography has passed through an evolution or experienced a revolution in the years since 1945. Whichever view an individual reader adopts, he or she must recognize some continuity – perhaps especially in geography as it has continued through the years and indeed the centuries. In this way these essays, widely different though they may strike the reader in objective, scope and even style, give an indication of geography’s strengths and weaknesses in the inter-war years, and it may help them to appreciate both the range and the excitement of a subject that is professed today by, literally, hundreds, even thousands, more than in the 1918–45 period. Happily most of them – even including perhaps those who have not succeeded in finding appropriate appointment for geographers to date since their graduation, and irrespective of the generation to which they belong – are well content to regard themselves

as involved in what S. W. Wooldridge, as great an expositor of the Scriptures as he was of his geomorphological ideas, referred to, with legitimate adaptation of one of the Pauline letters of the New Testament, as 'the high calling of geographer' (Wooldridge 1950: 11).

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2 Geography during the inter-war years

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'Far be it from me,' wrote H. J. Fleure in 1916, 'to think of suggesting an Act of Uniformity as regards geographical method ... the adaptability of the subject to the teacher's talents and opportunities is greater than that of most subjects ...' (Fleure 1915-16). He was writing at a time when education in general, and university education in particular, was apparently static through the misery of war but was about to experience a vast expansion, especially in secondary schools and universities. For all this the foundation had been laid in the new grammar schools and in the small departments of geography and other supposedly 'new' subjects. The advance was to come when Honours courses were provided, of which the first was at Liverpool in 1917 in the Arts faculty, followed a year later at Aberystwyth, in geography and anthropology, in both the Arts and Science faculties, and also in London in 1918, and by Cambridge and Leeds in 1919. No directive was given from government or from any national organization of geographers on the content of courses, so it is hardly surprising that they were largely a reflection of the views and tastes of the geographers who had become heads of departments, mostly working with one or two junior colleagues whose work in some cases was supplemented by courses given in other departments such as physical geography by geologists or the history of ancient geography by classical scholars.

No problems arose through association with classical scholars of whom one, J. L. Myres of Oxford, was a very firm supporter of the Geographical

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Association and of geography in general. For a time he acted as external examiner in geography in the University of Liverpool where, from 1907 to 1910, he had been Gladstone Professor of Greek and Lecturer in Ancient Geography before becoming Wykeham Professor of Ancient History in the University of Oxford. But the control of the teaching in physical geography by geologists was against the wishes of most (though not all) geographers, including Halford J. Mackinder; though L. W. Lyde at University College London was happy to discard geomorphology as a 'mere morbid futility' to his geological colleagues and to concentrate on regional human geography of his own distinctive vintage. To S. W. Wooldridge and others a sound regional geography was inevitably based on a thorough appreciation of physical geography, on which the work of W. M. Davis and others, including Emmanuel de Martonne in France and Charles A. Cotton in New Zealand, gave enlightenment. The battle between regionalists and systematists was foreshadowed during the inter-war period but many physical geographers regarded their research as a primary contribution to a regional synthesis, though this did not preclude concern with geomorphology for its own interest and value.

Before the time when Honours graduates were available, the demand for suitably trained teachers of geography had been met partly by diploma courses, such as those in Oxford from 1899, with summer schools arranged by various universities or by the Geographical Association. Partly through the tactful support of Mackinder the Royal Geographical Society saw little reason to fear rivalry from the activity of the Geographical Association. Rather they hoped that the new body, founded in 1893, might be more successful than they had been in advancing school education in geography. The Royal Geographical Society remained fully conscious of its concern with exploration, for the mapping of the world, for the mathematical and historical aspects of cartography, and for the study of the British Empire. Generally it was chary of venturing into political geography, but fortunately not always: it welcomed a highly contentious paper on possible post-war European boundaries by L. W. Lyde, who had been professor of geography at University College London from 1903 (Lyde 1915). It also welcomed Marion Newbigin (editor of the *Scottish Geographical Magazine*) when she gave a thoughtful paper on 'Race and nationality' two years later (Newbigin 1917). But after the War the new countries were far more adequately treated in the *American Geographical Review*, vastly improved in content and presentation from 1916 by the vigorous editorship of Isaiah Bowman, and in the *Annales de Géographie*. The old, safe study of exploration, cartography and physical geography prevailed while those who were looking for new fields