

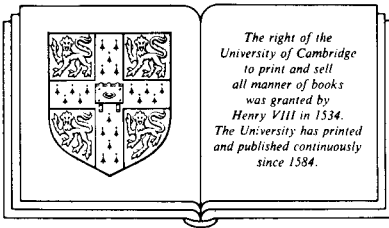
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ROBERT W. STEEL



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Preface

This collection of essays began as a direct consequence of the work that I undertook on behalf of the Institute of British Geographers to prepare a history of its first fifty years. It was suggested to me that, while I was delving into the development of the subject in 1933, the year in which the Institute was founded, and the years immediately before then, I might also attempt an assessment of the position of geography in Britain between the wars. The idea appealed to me for I had been taught in Oxford by J. N. L. Baker who had always impressed upon me and my fellow students the importance of an appreciation of the history of geography. I subscribed wholly to the view that he had expressed in a lecture on 'Geography and its history' given to Section E (Geography) of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1955 (Baker 1955:198):

The history of geography is long and honourable. No geographer need apologise for it or be ashamed of it ... it is only when the geography of our day is seen against the background of its history that its present position can be appreciated and its future prospects assessed.

I noted, too, that R. J. Johnston in his *Geography and geographers* had observed that 'although this book is about human geography since 1945, the discussions of that period must be preceded by a brief outline of the nature of the discipline in the previous decades' and he suggested that 1945 'did not mark a major divide in the views on geographical philosophy and methodology' (Johnston 1979: 28). And I was also conscious of the many times in the past when there have been references to a 'new geography'.

It seemed right, therefore, to take note of the valuable foundations of geography laid in the past, and not least of the years between the two World Wars of the twentieth century, upon which so much of the discipline, as taught and practised today, is based. It is also important

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to appreciate how much was done with very slender means and minimal resources of men and women, money and materials.

But clearly it was not possible for an assessment of inter-war geography to be undertaken by one individual, especially as in my case I graduated only during the last few years of that period. I needed the help of collaborators who, while not willing or able to undertake the task single-handed, were prepared to work with others. So the idea of an assessment of inter-war geography was born. It was emphasized that it was not to be a chronological account nor a series of departmental histories, and that, where appropriate, reference should be made to the concepts of those years – relating, for example, to regional geography – and to the controversies that arose from time to time – between, for example, those who subscribed to ‘determinism’ as opposed to ‘possibilism’. During 1980 and 1981 potential contributors were approached and most of them were very happy to join me, especially as it was made clear that there was to be no strait-jacket for their contributions. They were to write on what they knew and on what they had been involved in during such years as they had been geographers between 1918 and 1945. Some had, unfortunately, to decline for health reasons or because of other commitments, and this explains why there is no contribution specifically concerned with either Scotland or Ireland. All who accepted fulfilled their obligations, and how successful they were in their interpretation of their assignment is for readers to judge for themselves.

What I had not anticipated was the effect of death in a group of senior geographers, the majority of whom were seventy or more years of age. As editor I regard it as a special privilege to have been responsible for three essays, all distinctive and in a variety of ways characteristic of these authors right at the end of their distinguished careers, seeing the light of day posthumously. The three colleagues who have died are K. C. Edwards, E. G. Bowen and S. H. Beaver. Their essays in this volume may not be the best of the many that they published during their long and productive lives, but they tell us a great deal about their authors and of the influences that helped, in the years between the wars, to form their careers and to make them the distinguished geographers that they were.

With the editor of the volume being among the youngest of those collaborating, it was necessary for him to adopt a light touch. My colleagues accepted their assignments most willingly and were very ready to listen to my suggestions; but I did not regard it as proper to cajole them in any way or to insist on there being a standard form for each and every essay. So a varied group of geographers has produced what reviewers

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will no doubt describe as a mixed bag or a motley collection, as they invariably do of collections of essays, perhaps particularly those published in *Festschrift* volumes. In a sense this is a *Festschrift* of the 1918–1945 period. Readers will be able to note how certain branches of the subject – historical geography, for example – developed; and how much work in physical geography was undertaken – by geologists as well as by geographers. They will learn of the ways in which geographers applied themselves to the investigation of a wide range of problems that led to the Land Utilisation Survey of Great Britain and to the early years of the Ministry of Town and Country Planning established during the Second World War. They will also discover how geographers – some of them contributors to this book – trained themselves or were trained in a world that is very different from that of the eighties, and how all of them were restricted in the number of specifically ‘geographical’ books available to them and in the opportunities provided for participation in fieldwork or post-graduate research.

Inevitably in a volume such as this there is an emphasis on personal experience and involvement in the development of the subject. A better, more integrated and more comprehensive – and perhaps less discursive – book might have been written twenty or fifteen years ago; but in fact no such book was produced by any of the senior geographers then available, and no one attempted an up-dating of Griffith Taylor’s *Geography in the Twentieth Century*, published in 1951. It is unlikely that another book similar to the present one will ever appear since a fair proportion of those still active (and also active in the 1920s and 1930s as teachers or students) are already represented in the authorship of this volume. How comparatively few of the pioneers of the inter-war period are still alive is emphasized by one of the discoveries made during the writing of the history of the Institute of British Geographers. When the volume was published in 1984 there were only eighteen of the seventy-three founder members of 1933 still alive (Steel 1984: 145).

Each reader will make his or her assessment of the state and status of geography in the inter-war years in the light of his or her perception of what the different authors have written. It was thought, however, that it would be valuable to have included in the volume a reaction from selected geographers who, while very much younger than the senior authors, had known most, if not all, of them and who would in consequence appreciate the men and women as well as the geography professed by these geographers. They were chosen with considerable care, and in J. Allan Patmore and David R. Stoddart the editor felt that he had two collaborators whose reactions to the subject of this volume would be

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useful to us and, we hoped, helpful to the readers of these essays as well. One is an Oxford-trained geographer, a specialist in human geography. His university experience since leaving Oxford has been divided between the Departments of Geography in the University of Liverpool and of Hull. The other is a product of the Cambridge Department of Geography with special interest in physical geography as well as in the history of ideas in geography. David Stoddart in contrast to Allan Patmore has spent the whole of his teaching career in one university, Cambridge, though he has a reputation of being one of the most travelled of British geographers, having carried out scientific work in Sierra Leone, Socotra, Aldabra, the USA and many other countries.

These two geographers could have tackled their task in much the same way and produced not dissimilar essays. Happily – and without discussion between themselves or with the editor – they have chosen to deal with their assignments in quite different ways. Dr Stoddart has given us a valuable review of geographers and geomorphology in Britain between the wars, producing an essay that is a valuable piece of work that could stand alone, without reference to the rest of the volume, but is in particular a commentary on J. A. Steers's survey of physical geography in the inter-war period when he was so closely concerned with many of its most significant developments. Professor Patmore's essay, in complete contrast, stems not from one or two of the essays but from all of them, and in a short but evocative essay he directs attention to the rest of the volume while at the same time underlining many of the special difficulties faced, in their younger days, by those who have drawn on their experiences of the inter-war years as the basis of their reminiscent essays.

In offering this book to readers and reviewers, and to all who appreciate, as the authors of these essays do, the position of geography today in schools, universities, polytechnics and education generally, there is therefore a delicate emphasis on the foundations of the subject as it is in the 1980s that go back many years. None of the writers believe – in contrast perhaps to the views of some of our younger colleagues – that geography suddenly emerged in Britain, or arrived from the USA, in the years immediately following the Second World War. It has had a long period of gestation beginning many centuries ago. Geographers do well to remind themselves often of the words of Richard Hakluyt who, in giving some public lectures on geography in Oxford more than 400 years ago, claimed to be 'the first that produced and showed both the old imperfectly composed, and the new lately reformed maps, globes, spheres and other instruments of this Art'.

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I am very grateful to all my collaborators who have cooperated most willingly and understandingly, and have shown great patience. Each of them would wish to thank those who have helped them with their secretarial skills and in other ways. As editor I am grateful for all the secretarial and other assistance given to me over a long period by, among others, Joan Lewis, Margaret Fox, Christine Williams, Betty Murray and Betty Thomson and for the ready help forthcoming from Elspeth Buxton, librarian of the Oxford School of Geography. In the task of editing, I have, as always, been greatly helped by my wife Eileen, a fellow student in the Oxford School of Geography, and my companion in geographical work and travel at home and overseas, particularly in Africa, for nearly half a century.

Swansea

Robert W. Steel

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