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## GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

### *Bridging the Divide*

*Geography and History* is the first book for over a century to examine comprehensively the interdependence of the two disciplines. Alan Baker, an internationally honoured historical geographer, focuses upon the work of North American, British and French historians and geographers but takes a global and interdisciplinary perspective upon the theory and practice of historical geography and geographical history. He analyses the views of historians on the relationship of their discipline to geography, and of geographers on the relationship of theirs to history. He considers in turn locational geographies and spatial histories, environmental geographies and histories, landscape geographies and histories, and regional geographies and histories. Seeking to bridge the 'Great Divide' between history and geography, Dr Baker identifies some basic principles relating historical geography not only to history but also to geography, a reworking which signifies a 'new beginning' for this scholarly hybrid.

ALAN BAKER is an internationally renowned historical geographer who in 1998 was honoured by France as a *Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques* for his contribution to the field.

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# GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

Bridging the Divide

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**ALAN R. H. BAKER**

*Emmanuel College, Cambridge*



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‘Dwellers all in time and space’  
*Praise my soul, the King of Heaven*     H. F. Lyte (1793–1847)

For Sandra, Jeremy, Andrew, Bethan, Jack and Sarah

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## Preface

More than a century ago, H. B. George wrote a book addressing *The Relations of Geography and History* (Oxford 1901). He was writing as a historian working with the basic premise, stated in his opening sentence, that ‘history is not intelligible without geography’. I start as a geographer from the complementary premise that geography is not intelligible without history. My aim in this book is to explore the interdependence of geography and history, doing so as a geographer. Although much has been written on the relations of geography and history since 1901, there has not been another book-length treatment of the topic in English. Lucien Febvre’s *La terre et l’évolution humaine: introduction géographique à l’histoire* (1922), translated as *A Geographical Introduction to History* (1925), came close to being so. A more recent approximation, the posthumous editing of some lectures by H. C. Darby, published almost forty years after they were written, is more concerned with the nature of historical geography than with ‘the relations of history and geography’, despite using the latter theme as the book’s title (Darby 2002). The absence of a successor to George’s book may be because its topic is so vast, but it may also be because its theme has been so contentious, with the persistence of what one place-sensitive historian has described as ‘the Great Divide’ between history and geography (Marshall 1985: 22). My book explores the nature of that divide and ways of bridging it.

I am writing mainly for a senior undergraduate and graduate student audience, both in history and in geography. The base from which I conduct these historiographical forays is my own doctoral research on the agricultural and settlement geography of medieval England and my later work on the social geography of rural France during the nineteenth century. Underpinning those substantive research projects has been a deepening curiosity about the theory and practice of both geography and history, coupled with a growing awareness of the diversity of the practice of historical geography both from time to time and from place to place. I have attempted to make sense of this heterogeneity while joyfully celebrating the different perspectives and practices of geography and history.

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This book is not a manual of historical geography: it is not an instruction book for those wishing to become one of its practitioners. Nor is it a kind of Michelin Guide to historical geography: it is not my intention to list and appraise all, or even any, of the specific problems and sources, methods and techniques, in the realm of historical geography. My more general objective is to survey the historiography of the relations of geography and history, and to explore the territories of historical geography and geographical history. My dual aim is to deepen the historical awareness of geographers and to widen the geographical consciousness of historians. I am not seeking primarily either to reflect current trends in historical geography or to set an agenda for its future development, although both of these issues will be touched upon. Research interests wax and wane, but my concern is to identify some of the basic continuities of historical geography and of the relations between geography and history.

The idea of writing this book originated some years ago. Its completion has been my academic priority since retiring from my lectureship at Cambridge. I have benefited from discussions on its theme with many colleagues throughout the world over many years. H. C. Darby initially awakened my interest in the methodology of historical geography when I was a student at University College London and I owe Clifford an enormous debt. My own ideas developed independently, however, while I was fortunate enough to be a colleague of his at Cambridge and I began to question some of his views, much to his thinly disguised disapproval for he did not bear criticism lightly. None the less, Clifford remained the basic inspiration for my interest in the methodology of historical geography. As Friedrich Nietzsche observed in his *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883), 'one repays a teacher badly if one remains only a pupil'.

Other colleagues have shared readily my enthusiasm for debate. I am especially grateful to Hugh Prince, who has been willing to engage in argument with me ever since he was my tutor and then colleague at University College London. I am also heavily indebted to many colleagues in historical geography at Cambridge who over many years have participated in lively discussions with me about the natures of geography and history. They have included Tim Bayliss-Smith, Mark Billinge, Jim Duncan, Harold Fox, Robin Glasscock, Derek Gregory, Philip Howell, Gerry Kearns, Jack Langton, Ron Martin, Jean Mitchell, John Patten, Clifford Smith, Richard Smith and Tony Wrigley. In addition, I have learned a great deal from my graduate students, especially from those who have subsequently become distinguished historical geographers or geographical historians: Michael Barkham, Sarah Bendall, Iain Black, Laura Cameron, Bruce Campbell, Mark Cleary, Michael Heffernan and Mark Overton.

As my interest in the methodology of historical geography deepened, so I developed productive contacts with a widening band of its practitioners. Members of the Historical Geography Research Group of the Institute of British Geographers have provided intellectual stimulation over many years, most especially Robin Butlin, Hugh Clout, Richard Dennis, Felix Driver, Roger Kain, Richard Lawton,

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Paul Laxton, Chris Philo, Michael Williams and Charles Withers – and, of course, the late Brian Harley. Furthermore, this book would not have been the same without the international contacts I have enjoyed, for example, with many North American historical geographers, including Serge Courville, Jock Galloway, Peter Goheen, Leonard Guelke, Cole Harris, Deryck Holdsworth, Donald Meinig, Brian Osborne, David Robinson and Graeme Wynn. In addition, I have made a deliberate attempt over the years to bridge linguistic and cultural barriers, cultivating links with historical geographers throughout the world. I have especially benefited from those made with, and through, Yehoshua Ben-Arieh (Israel), Paul Claval (France), Dietrich Denecke (Germany), Leos Jelecek (Czech Republic), Jianxiang Ge (China), Akihiro Kinda (Japan), Jean-Robert Pitte (France), Joe Powell (Australia), Ulf Sporrang (Sweden) and Weimin Que (China).

I have also benefited enormously from personal contacts with many historians, although my encounters with each of them have been more casual than have those with geographers. Especially influential have been Maurice Beresford, Régis Bouis, Peter Burke, Alain Corbin, W. G. Hoskins, John Merriman, Joan Thirsk and Robert Tombs, and I am grateful to them for their stimulus and encouragement.

Some of the ideas presented in this book I have tested at seminars and conferences, especially those organised by the Historical Geography Research Group of the Institute of British Geographers and by the Association of American Geographers, at the series of International Conferences of Historical Geographers, at meetings of the Permanent European Conference for the Study of the European Landscape, and in the Cambridge series of Occasional Discussions in Historical Geography. Such exposure has always been beneficial and I am grateful to the many participants at those gatherings for their constructive comments.

In addition, of course, this book rests upon my knowledge and understanding of the writings of many geographers, historians and other scholars with whom I am not acquainted personally. My debt to them is beyond measure. Some of that obligation is explicitly acknowledged in the references. Given the scope of this book, however, my citations embrace only a small part of the relevant literature and relatively few of the scholars cultivating the two fields of geography and history. The references cited are those which are familiar to me and which seem to me to serve well in illustrating particular points I wish to make. Although extensive, the references are specific to this book and do not comprise a general or comprehensive list of works on, and in, geography and history. The relative merits of studies included and of those omitted are not in question. I confess to many sins of omission; I plea by way of mitigation that in a book of this kind such sins are unavoidable. All readers of my book will know of other case studies that I might have used to illustrate its general points.

Let me spell out two of my stylistic conventions. First, in the text I use the past tense when referring to publications prior to 1994 and the present tense when citing works published in that year or later (my working assumption being that the half-life of historico-geographical literature – the time during which one-half

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of all the currently active literature was published – is about eight years). Second, when mentioning an author in the text for the first time, I include her/his initials or forename; subsequent mentions normally use only the surname.

Material for this book has been garnered in many institutions and I am grateful to their libraries and staffs without whose expert assistance this project could not have been achieved. I am grateful especially to the many supportive staff of the University Library at Cambridge and to Jane Robinson and Colin MacLennan of the Library of the Department of Geography at the University of Cambridge. I owe thanks to Phil Stickler and James Youlden of that department for help with preparing the illustrations. I am also literally indebted to various institutions which have funded my explorations. I thank especially the University of Cambridge, Emmanuel College, Cambridge, the British Academy, the British Council, the Canada Council, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and the Leverhulme Trust. In addition, I am grateful to the many universities in North America, Europe, Israel, Japan, and China which have invited me to present papers and to engage in discussions with their staffs and students. I am also considerably beholden to Cambridge University Press, and especially to Richard Fisher, its Director in Humanities and Social Sciences, for the opportunity to write this book and for patiently awaiting its completion. Similarly, I am immensely grateful to Richard Dennis and Deryck Holdsworth who made very constructive comments on my drafts. For any errors that persist, I remain responsible – as I am, of course, for the opinions expressed.

The final stages of the book have benefited enormously from the care of Jackie Warren, Production Editor (Humanities and Social Sciences) at Cambridge University Press, and from the attention to detail given to the copy and proofs by Carol Fellingham Webb. The index has been compiled by Simon Cross. I am very appreciative of the contribution each of them has made to the end product.

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Finally, I am deeply grateful to Sandra, my wife, for her unbounded confidence and support. I am dedicating this book to her and to our sons, Andrew and Jeremy, and to our daughter-in-law, Bethan, and our two grandchildren, Jack and Sarah. While this book is about researching and writing the past, what matters most to me are their futures.

*Emmanuel College, Cambridge  
St Cecilia's Day, 2002*