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978-1-108-00460-2 - The Fifty Years' Work of the Royal Geographical Society

Clements R. Markham

Excerpt

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THE  
FIFTY YEARS' WORK  
OF THE  
ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY.

BY  
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CHAPTER I.

THE FATHERS OF ENGLISH GEOGRAPHY.

THE Royal Geographical Society completed the fiftieth year of its existence on the 16th of July, 1880, and its fiftieth anniversary meeting took place on the 31st of May, 1880. In order to celebrate this auspicious event, and also to supply a useful means of reference to Fellows, I have been commissioned by the Council to write the present brief history of the Society. My plan is to give, in four introductory chapters, a condensed view of the ways and means by which the work undertaken by the Society was performed previous to the date of its formation, and of the circumstances which immediately led to its being brought into existence. The fifth chapter contains a history of the original formation of the Geographical Society. The sixth and seventh chapters are devoted to memorial accounts of the Presidents, Secretaries, and other leading members of the governing body. The eighth and ninth review the career of the Geographical Society with reference to the expeditions which it has helped, or actively promoted, including grants-in-aid, and awards in recognition of the services of eminent geographers and travellers. The history of the various publications of the Society, of the rise and progress of the library and map-room, and of the educational measures adopted by the Council, forms the subject of the tenth chapter; and the eleventh reviews the progress of the Society as regards members, finances, places of meeting, and

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house accommodation. A comparative view of geographical knowledge when the Society was founded in 1830, and in 1880, with a notice of the work that still remains to be done, illustrates its career of laborious usefulness, and forms a fitting conclusion of the work.

The original objects of the Society were to collect, digest, and publish interesting and useful geographical facts and discoveries; to accumulate a collection of books on geography, voyages, and travels, and of maps and charts; to keep specimens of such instruments as are most serviceable to a traveller; to afford assistance, instruction, and advice to explorers; and to correspond with other bodies or individuals engaged in geographical pursuits.

It is obvious that as soon as the people of England began to foster and encourage maritime enterprise and the discovery of unknown countries, the need for some provision or other through which these objects might in part at least be attained would be felt and, to some extent, supplied. The record and preservation of the history of adventure and discovery, the utilisation of results, and the instruction of explorers by land and sea, became necessities so soon as England commenced her glorious career as a nation of discoverers and explorers. When Sebastian Cabot began to make the history of English maritime and inland discovery, it would have been strange indeed if some man or body of men had not arisen, at the same time, to write its first pages. The very fact that we can now enjoy the perusal of those early efforts of our countrymen is a proof that there was not wanting the will to perform, even then, the duties since undertaken by our Society. The fathers of English geography, the forerunners of the Geographical Society, who, during nearly three centuries, performed our work with zeal and ability, though often with insufficient resources and scant encouragement, ought not to be forgotten by their successors. In truth, the history of the Society properly commences with the efforts of those industrious geographers who did our work amidst many difficulties, from the time when Englishmen first began to emulate the adventurous deeds of the Portuguese and Spaniards who preceded them in the field of discovery.

Richard Eden is the Father of English Geography. He it was who first conceived the idea of performing, single-handed and with inadequate means, the duties which our Society proposed to itself more than two centuries afterwards. He it was who first collected together the records of geographical work, and provided the means of instruction to explorers and travellers. Coming up to London from Cambridge, where he had been a pupil of Sir Thomas Smith at Queen's College, young Eden

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was a spectator of the gorgeous public entry of Philip and Mary. He describes himself as nearly lifted out of self-command by the excitement of the scene. He beheld the union of the Sovereign of the Indies with his own Queen, and he resolved, on the spot, to set about some work which might fitly commemorate the event.

Eden wrote his 'Decades of the New World' in 1555—a little black-letter volume, which he found great difficulty in getting printed, but which is a laborious and very precious collection of the geographical work of his day. He was the first Englishman who supplied to his countrymen the means of studying, in a collected form, the marvellous history of discovery which was then exciting the wonder and admiration of the age. Eden desired that England should emulate the deeds of those who were first in the field. He gave his countrymen translations from Peter Martyr, Oviedo, Gomara, Ramusio, Pigafetta; and added the earliest narratives of English voyages to Guinea and to the north. His laudable object was that "some memory thereof might remain to posterity, if contempt of knowledge should hereafter bury in oblivion so worthy attempts." Eden was the intimate friend of Sebastian Cabot, and attended him in his last moments; and he also knew the Arctic navigators Chanceller and Borough. It was at the request of Stephen Borough that Eden designed his translation of the 'Art of Navigation' by Martin Cortes, "for the increase of skilful pilots whereof then there were very few." So that he strove to do the work now undertaken by the Geographical Society, both by preserving the records of accomplished work and by providing the means of performing efficient service, and of receiving instruction. A new edition of his 'History of Travayle' was published with additions by Willes in 1577, and his translation of Cortes went through ten editions between 1561 and 1615.

The mantle of Eden fell upon a better known but not more zealous and conscientious worker in the cause of geography. Richard Hakluyt came of an old Herefordshire family, was educated at Westminster School, and elected a student of Christ Church in 1570. He very early took a deep interest in voyages and travels, and in all things connected with the naval glory of his countrymen, and he was indefatigable in collecting information. "His genius," says old Fuller, "inclined him to the study of history, and especially to the marine part thereof, which made him keep constant intelligence with the most noted seamen of Wapping, until the day of his death."

Hakluyt, like Eden, has given us an interesting account of the origin and growth of his love for geography. "I do

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remember," he says, "that being a youth, and one of Her Majesty's scholars at Westminster, that fruitful nursery, it was my hap to visit the chamber of my cousin, a gentleman of the Middle Temple, at a time when I found lying upon his board certain books of cosmography, with an universal map. He seeing me somewhat curious in the view thereof began to instruct my ignorance. From the map he brought me to the Bible, and turning to the 107th Psalm, directed me to the 23rd and 24th verses where I read that they which go down to the sea in ships, they see the works of the Lord and His wonders in the deep. Which words of the Prophet, together with my cousin's discourse, took me in so deep an impression that I would, by God's assistance, prosecute that knowledge and kind of literature, the doors whereof (after a sort) were so happily opened before me."

From that time Hakluyt devoted his life to the cause of geography. At an early age he was appointed to read lectures at Oxford on that branch of knowledge, and "he was the first that produced and showed both the older and imperfectly composed, and the new lately reformed mappes, globes, spheres, and other instruments of this arte, for demonstration, in the common schooles, to the singular pleasure and general contentment of his auditory." In 1584 he went to Paris as chaplain to the Embassy, returning to England in 1588, and becoming Archdeacon of Westminster in 1602. While in Paris he translated the 'History of Florida' from the French, and was indefatigable in collecting geographical information. His great work, 'The Principal Navigations, Voyages, and Discoveries of Englishmen made by sea or over land to the most remote and farthest distant quarters of the earth,' was published in 1589; and the large edition in three volumes in 1598-1600. Under his auspices also appeared the translations of Peter Martyr by Lok, of Leo Africanus by Pory, of Pigafetta's Congo by Hartwell, and of Mendoza's China by Parke. Hakluyt corresponded with Ortelius and Mercator, and worked as hard at the educational interests of geography as at the preservation and utilisation of its records. Personally acquainted with the leading travellers and explorers, he was also foremost in the encouragement of science and in promoting the construction of good maps and charts. He took a leading part in establishing the courses of lectures on navigation which were delivered at Sir Thomas Smith's house in Philpot Lane, by Edward Wright and Dr. Hood. It was for Hakluyt that Wright prepared the famous map of the world on the new projection in 1600, and it was Hakluyt who helped Molyneux in the construction of his famous globes. He

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it was, too, who as Historiographer of the East India Company, prepared instructions and drew up lists of commodities to be obtained from and in demand at the various ports of the East.

Hakluyt had one great advantage over Eden. In the days of Elizabeth the interest of the nation was fully aroused on all questions relating to geographical research. Those were the times when the merchants of England were as liberal as they were wealthy; when no man asked the fatuous question *cui bono?* but when all, high and low, generously applauded the efforts of explorers, and when it was the highest ambition of the flower of England's sons to add to her fame by achieving discoveries in distant lands. Nor were the students of scientific geography less zealous or less successful than the adventurers by sea and land. Hakluyt, as President of an Elizabethan Geographical Society, would have gathered around him, for a Council, men of action such as Hawkins, Raleigh, Drake, Frobisher, Lancaster, Jenkinson, Gilbert and Davis; and mathematicians and cosmographers such as Hood and Wright, Digges and Molyneux, Dee and Hues, Harriott and Briggs. These were the fathers of our science.

Hakluyt died on the 23rd of November, 1616, at the age of sixty-three, and was buried in Westminster Abbey. He left behind him a great number of manuscripts, which came into the hands of the Rev. Samuel Purchas, rector of St. Michael's on Ludgate Hill, in about the year 1620. These precious documents, with many others, much abridged and indifferently edited, were published in 1625 in the great work in five volumes, which its compiler entitled 'Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas his Pilgrimes.' Want of funds is some excuse for the abridgments and deplorable omissions, for Purchas appears to have been in very embarrassed circumstances when he died in 1626, only ten years after Hakluyt's decease.

The forty years which intervened between the death of Purchas and the foundation of the Royal Society were troublous times, and geography could not flourish as in the days of the great Queen. Yet Englishmen were not altogether idle. The lectures at Gresham College were continued, one of its Professors invented the Gunter's Scale and introduced the measuring chain, and the great work of Hondius received an English dress. For this useful service we are indebted to a very gallant soldier. Though trained in camps from his boyhood, Henry Hexham ever cultivated a love for literary pursuits. When quite a young boy, he was the Governor's page during the siege of Ostend, and while Sir Francis Vere, roused suddenly from his bed, engaged a desperate storming party at push of pike, young Hexham calmly went on fastening his master's

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points in the very thick of the fight. He also recorded the events of that memorable siege. He was at many a hard-fought battle and siege in after years, and he wrote the histories of the operations before Maestricht and Bois le Duc. It is to this military writer that we owe the grandest geographical work of the first Stuart period. The 'Atlas or Geographicke description of the regions countries and kingdomes of the world, represented by new and exact maps,' by Henry Hondius and John Johnson, was translated into English by Henry Hexham in 1636, "enlarged and augmented out of many worthy authors of my own nation." This superb atlas, in two folio volumes, brings the record of geographical work up to the time of the outbreak of the great civil war in England.

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[More information](#)*Geography under the Royal Society.*

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## CHAPTER II.

## THE ROYAL SOCIETY.

THE idea of forming a scientific Society in this country was entertained and partly developed during the Protectorate, and in 1665 the Royal Society was created for the improvement of natural knowledge. In the wide scope of its original objects the science of geography was included, but the share of attention that it received was never in proportion to its importance. From 1665 to 1848 the Royal Society printed 5336 papers in its 'Philosophical Transactions,' out of which only 77 were devoted to geography and topography, or very little over 1 per cent. The proportion in which the various sciences have received attention from the Royal Society is as follows:—

	Papers.		Papers.
Medicine and Chemistry .. ..	1949	Mathematics .. .. .	285
Astronomy .. .. .	621	Botany .. .. .	280
Mechanics .. .. .	461	Optics .. .. .	206
Zoology .. .. .	420	Miscellaneous .. .. .	120
Electricity and Magnetism ..	416	Archæology .. .. .	117
Geology and Mineralogy .. ..	384	Geography and Topography ..	77

These seventy-seven papers include a table of places whose positions have been fixed by astronomical observations, some memoirs on the construction of maps, methods of estimating distances, an account of a lake in Carniola (1669), of the Hudson's Bay Settlements (1770), of the Falls of Niagara (1722), of the Patagonians (1770), the Falkland Islands (1776), the North American Indians (1773 and 1786), and of Bogle's Mission to Tibet (1777). Eden and Hakluyt each did more for geography in thirty years than the Royal Society did in a century.

Still the science of geography owes much to the Royal Society. If little attention was given to the work of explorers, very much was done to improve the scientific methods by which explorers efficiently perform their work. The institution of the Greenwich Observatory in 1676 originated in the extension of navigation and the consequent importance of discovering a means of accurately determining longitude, and the Fellows of the Royal Society were appointed Visitors. The President of the Royal Society was an *ex officio* Member of the Board of Longitude which was established in 1713, and the Commissioners



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conceived and matured the plan of the Nautical Almanac under the auspices of Dr. Maskelyne, the Astronomer Royal, the publication of which was commenced in 1767; while, under their superintendence, the survey of the coasts of Great Britain and Ireland was commenced in 1741. Rewards for northern discovery began to be offered by the Government in 1745, at the instance of the Royal Society, Christopher Middleton having, four years previously, made important discoveries in Hudson's Bay, including the Wager River and Repulse Bay.

But the most important geographical work which was done under the auspices of the Royal Society resulted from the necessity for observing the transit of Venus at far distant points on the earth's surface. The Government granted 4000*l.* to the Society for expenses. In 1769 Captain Cook sailed on his first voyage, accompanied by Sir Joseph Banks, and in 1771 on his second voyage. The transit of Venus also led to the despatch of Mr. Wales to Hudson's Bay in 1769, who wintered at Churchill River, and contributed a paper on the Hudson's Bay Company's Territory to the 'Philosophical Transactions.' Meanwhile the persevering representations of Mr. Daines Barrington induced the Royal Society to submit a memorial to the Government, urging the desirability of sending an expedition to discover how far navigation was practicable towards the North Pole. The expedition of Captain Phipps in 1773 was the result, and thus commenced the glorious history of modern Arctic enterprise, undertaken from the desire of increasing—not wealth, but knowledge. Three years afterwards Captain Cook sailed on his third and last voyage, during which further discoveries were made in the Arctic regions, on the Pacific side. The great African traveller, James Bruce, returned from Abyssinia in 1774 and published his narrative in 1790.

The establishment of our Indian Empire also led to the necessity for surveys, and consequently to great advances in geographical knowledge. The careers of Rennell and Dalrymple were commenced in India, but their love for geography and their zealous devotion to its interests led them to continue their labours after their return home. In very different ways they were both geographers of the Elizabethan type.

James Rennell, as a thoughtful and scientific scholar, stands amongst the foremost in the front rank of English geographers. Born in 1742, he commenced life in the navy, and afterwards took service in the army of Lord Clive and rose to the rank of Major. As Surveyor General of Bengal he mapped the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers, and surveyed the districts of Bengal and Bahar between 1763 and 1782. His famous map of India was published in 1788, and the memoir followed in 1792. His



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great works on the geographical system of Herodotus and on the retreat of the Ten Thousand appeared in 1800 and 1816; and he devoted many years to the collection of log books, with a view to investigating the currents of the Atlantic. After he had reached his 87th year, Major Rennell still possessed all his intellectual faculties in full vigour, and devoted many hours of each day to his favourite pursuit. He was distinguished for true, patient, and persevering research; his critical judgment was seldom at fault, and his work is always reliable. He died on the 29th of March, 1830, a few months before the formation of the Geographical Society. Rennell, like Hakluyt, was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Alexander Dalrymple was remarkable rather for his indefatigable industry in collecting geographical materials than for original criticism or research. Born in 1737, he went out to Madras in 1752, and acquired much nautical experience during a voyage to the Eastern Archipelago in 1759. When he returned home in 1777 he received the appointment of Hydrographer to the East India Company, and his labours are represented by 58 charts, 740 plans, and 50 nautical memoirs. He also published translations of voyages in the South Pacific, and many geographical tracts. Dalrymple was the first Hydrographer to the Admiralty, a post which he held from its creation in 1795 until a few months before his death in June 1808.

It has been seen that the Royal Society, by encouraging all investigations and discoveries which had for their object the advancement of scientific geography, and the improvement of methods of observation, and also by addressing the Government with a view to the despatch of important expeditions, did a great deal to advance the special objects of geographers. It was in the work of utilising and publishing the narratives of voyages and travels that the Royal Society failed. In this respect the labours of Eden and Hakluyt were continued by various compilers and publishers through the last century; for the demand for such information never slackened, as is clearly proved by the way in which these collections of voyages and travels continued to be published. 'Harris's Voyages,' in two large folio volumes, appeared in 1705, and a new edition came out in 1764. In the interval 'Astley's Voyages,' in four quarto volumes, were published in 1745-47; and 'Churchill's Collection of Voyages and Travels,' containing several hitherto unpublished narratives, was issued between 1707 and 1747, and consisted of eight large volumes. 'Pinkerton's Geography' was published in 1802, and his 'Collection of Voyages and Travels,' in seventeen quarto volumes, followed in 1808-14; while 'Kerr's Collection,' in eighteen octavo volumes, came out

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at Edinburgh from 1811 to 1824. There were also three valuable collections having special reference to voyages in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Dalrymple, in two volumes, gave the 'Spanish and Dutch Voyages in the South Pacific' (1770-71); Admiral Burney, who had served under Cook, supplied a more complete history of all the Pacific voyages in his valuable five volumes published from 1803 to 1817; and Dr. Hawkesworth gave an account of the voyages of Byron, Wallis, Carteret, and Cook in his well-known three volumes published in 1773.

During all this period, while the Royal Society and the publishers and map makers were, between them, doing the needful work at home, and explorers were actively at work abroad, there was very urgent need for some central organisation, to guide, control, and advance the business of geography, and to watch more closely over its interests. The Royal Society was much occupied with the advancement of other branches of science, and geography received less of its attention than any other. Yet Sir Joseph Banks, so many years the President of the Royal Society, was not only an ardent geographer, but also a great traveller; and it will now be seen that he took a leading part in the establishment and conduct of a separate association, with the special object of promoting geographical discovery.