# 125 years of the Geographical Association

## Peter Jackson

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*ABSTRACT: This article provides an overview of our disciplinary history on the occasion of the Geographical Association’s 125-year anniversary. It accepts that a definitive and comprehensive disciplinary history cannot be written, covering human and physical geography, conceptual and methodological developments, key figures and significant moments, also paying adequate attention to the changing intellectual environment and wider social context. Instead, the article is loosely chronological in structure, noting continuities and discontinuities between past and present, and raising questions about the kind of history we need in order to reflect critically on the past and to inform the Association’s future trajectory.*

## Introduction

On 20 May 1893, a dozen men gathered in the New Common Room at Christ Church, Oxford, to establish what was to become the Geographical Association (GA). The meeting was called by Halford (later Sir Halford) Mackinder and Douglas Freshfield (who would shortly quit the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) over its refusal to admit women) and attended by ten others, who were mostly public school teachers. Therefore, 2018 is the 125th anniversary of the founding of the GA, a cause for celebration and critical reflection.

The inaugural General Meeting of the GA was held in December 1894 at the Royal Colonial Institute in London (the GA’s first corporate member). The record shows that four key questions were discussed: Should geography exam papers be set by experts? Should physical geography be an essential feature of a geography course? Should knowledge of the whole world be required or more detailed regional knowledge? and Should geography be a compulsory school subject? To varying degrees, these questions are all still relevant today in the context of recent reforms to GCSE and A-level geography; the increasing specialisation of geographical knowledge within as well as between human and physical geography; debates about the decolonisation of geographical knowledge; and persistent questions about the place of geography in the school curriculum.

It is, of course, a daunting task to review the history of the discipline over more than a century, covering human and physical geography, core skills, key concepts and methodological trends. Readers might be expecting a history of geography (as a discipline) and an account of changes in geographical education (its pedagogical principles and practices), emphasising key events and institutions, and focusing on leading figures, academic trends and seminal publications. However, these ‘internal’ factors need to be balanced by an understanding of the wider social context that shapes the intellectual environment in which our disciplinary history has evolved.

All this is to justify my refusal to attempt to write a comprehensive or definitive history of the GA – an impossible task in my judgment. An alternative approach, taking a lead from the inaugural meeting of the Association, is to ask a series of rhetorical questions: What kind of history do we need to review the past and prepare for the future? What principles of inclusion or exclusion should be used? What would be its scope, both in narrow disciplinary terms and in terms of the wider social context? This is still a near-impossible task, but one that is slightly more tractable than aiming for an all-inclusive historical survey. Thus, the approach I have adopted is loosely chronological, identifying some key moments and episodes in the development of the discipline including the role of the GA as an institutional force in shaping this history, while noting significant continuities and discontinuities between the discipline’s past and present.

## Resources

Some excellent resources are available to help trace our disciplinary history. They include David Livingstone’s landmark study of *The Geographical Tradition* (1992), which is organised around a series of key ‘episodes’. Livingstone describes our disciplinary history as ‘a contested enterprise’ rather than a unitary project. While his work goes back to the Renaissance, in our 125-year period, Livingstone’s episodes include the founding of the discipline; the relationship between geography, race and empire; the rise and fall of regional geography; and the debate over quantification.

Other valuable resources include *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (now in its fifth edition) (Gregory *et al*., 2011), and its twin volume, *The Dictionary of Physical Geography* (now in its fourth edition) (Thomas, 2016). Neither is a ‘dictionary’ in the conventional sense. Rather than attempting to provide concise definitions of key terms, each volume is organised as a series of open-ended essays, tracing the flow of ‘words in motion’, with an emphasis on debate and disciplinary contestation. Johnston and Sidaway’s *Geography and Geographers* (now in its seventh edition) is equally indispensable, providing an authoritative and provocative guide to the development of Anglo-American human geography since 1945 (Johnston and Sidaway, 2015). The GA also has a useful (recently updated) chronology of key people, achievements, places and events on its website (see GA, 2018), and there is W.G.V. Balchin’s invaluable centenary history of *The Geographical Association* (1993), optimistically sub-titled ‘the first hundred years’.

## A loose chronology

When the GA was founded in 1893, the discipline was undergoing the development of Mackinder’s ‘New Geography’ (following his appointment at Oxford in 1887) and absorbing William Morris Davis’s account of the geographical cycle of erosion. Mackinder was a political geographer who saw geography as an aid to statecraft (Parker, 1982). He wrote about the ‘geographical pivot’ of history, famously declaring that ‘Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world’ (Mackinder, 1919, p. 150). He was also an influential educationalist, writing on the scope and methods of geography (Mackinder, 1887) and, later, on geography as a pivotal subject of education (Mackinder, 1921).

Davis’s cycle of erosion (also known simply as ‘the geographical cycle’) was published in 1899. Its significance is discussed at length in Chorley *et al*.’s *History of the Study of Landforms* (1973), the second volume of which is subtitled ‘the life and work of William Morris Davis’. Davis’s argument about landscape dynamics and the cyclical stages of youth, maturity and old age provides an opportunity to reflect on the wider context of evolutionary thinking. Darwinian thinking has, however, had a contested place in geographical history. Richard Hartshorne’s *The Nature of Geography* (1939) all-but ignores Darwin, while David Stoddart argues that ‘much of the geographical work of the past hundred years has … taken its inspiration from biology and in particular from Darwin’ (Stoddart, 1996, p. 683). Clearly, Charles Darwin’s place in our discipline is contentious and open to debate.

Mackinder’s protégé, A.J. Herbertson, was appointed as the first Professor of Geography at Oxford in 1905 (Mackinder having only attained the rank of Reader). Herbertson (1902) wrote on the importance of geographical knowledge, ignorance of which, he warned: ‘produces frequent friction and occasional wars, stupidity in commercial enterprise, hasty and reckless counsels … and loss of life’ (p. 127). He also wrote about ‘the scope and educational applications of geography’ (Herbertson, 1904) noting how university geography and geographical teaching in schools had become increasingly disconnected – later referred to as the ‘Great Divide’ (Goudie, 1993).

At this point, we might pause to comment on how our account has already become a history of ‘great white men’ (Mackinder and Herbertson, Darwin and Davis), reflecting what has been called the ‘masculinist’ knowledge that characterises our disciplinary history. This was parodied by Denis Cosgrove (1993) as involving ‘hairy-chested feats of scholarly endurance [showing] a muscular disdain for the fey and metropolitan’ (p. 516). In attempting to redress this masculinist bias, one might note the influential role of ‘formidable’ women such as Alice Garnett (1903–89) who served as President of the GA and Vice-President of the RGS, occupying her desk in the Department of Geography at Sheffield University for more than 40 years. However, we might prefer to mention the way that gender shapes all forms of geographical knowledge, as noted by Gillian Rose’s influential book on *Feminism and Geography* (1993).

To return to our chronological account, we should note the appearance of this journal, *The Geographical Teacher* (founded in 1905 and boldly renamed *Geography* in 1927). In 1917, H.J. Fleure became Professor of Geography and Anthropology at Aberystwyth and moved the GA Library (including its collection of books and lantern slides) to Wales. Unlike the RGS, the GA has moved around the UK, never settling in London. In 1918, the GA’s Standing Committees were established, so 2018 marks another anniversary that we are probably less likely to celebrate: 100 years of GA committees.

In the early 1920s, international branches of the GA were founded in Canada, West Africa and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka); and the GA co-operated with the BBC (1924) on the third attempt to climb Everest and other programmes, inaugurating what might now be referred to as ‘public engagement’. The 1920s also provide a good example of how some ideas do not travel well (or how they are taken up differently in different places). Carl Sauer’s ‘The morphology of landscape’ was published in 1925 and had a huge influence on American geography (where cultural geography is often used as a synonym for human geography). Sauer’s work includes the memorable lines: ‘The cultural landscape is fashioned out of a natural landscape by a culture group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape the result’ (1925, p. 46. It was much less influential in the UK than in Sauer’s native US, becoming a target of criticism during the develop ­ment of the so-called ‘new’ cultural geography in the 1980s – a debate that brought British and American geographers into conflict (Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987; Price and Lewis, 1993).

The 1930s and 1940s might be characterised as a period of geography in the service of the state, most notably through L. Dudley Stamp’s work on the Land Utilisation Survey of Britain, initiated in 1930 and involving collaboration with the Ordnance Survey and the then Ministry of Agriculture. The context was the need to increase food production during the Second World War where geography forged strong links with government and policy, a move that has revived in the current era with its emphasis on demonstrating the wider (social, economic and political) impact of academic research.

In 1933, the foundation of Institute of British Geographers (IBG) heralded the self-conscious ‘professionalisation’ of academic geography and posed a potential threat to the GA. The existence of multiple geographical societies (the RGS, IBG and GA) could be considered a strength or a weakness of the subject’s institutional organisation. There were moves to maintain dialogue between these bodies through the establishment of the Council on British Geography (CoBRIG) and later through the merger of the RGS with the IBG – a move that was not uncontroversial at the time.

By 1959, the GA had 56 local Branches including teacher associations from Kenya, Sierra Leone and Jamaica (who joined the GA in 1955). The Second Land Utilisation Survey was launched in the early 1960s, led by Alice Coleman, and the Madingley Lectures were held, leading to the publication of *Frontiers in Geographical Teaching* (Chorley and Haggett, 1965) and *Models in Geography* (Chorley and Haggett, 1967). This was a high point in the links between schools and universities, with Peter Haggett and Richard Chorley spearheading the development of a more scientific, quantitative and theoretical approach.

The 1960s and 1970s was a period of disciplinary ferment, symbolised by the publication of David Harvey’s rigorously theoretical *Explanation in Human Geography* (1969), followed just four years later by his passionately Marxist *Social Justice and the City* (1973). These debates followed the discipline’s so-called quantitative revolution that sought to reposition ‘Geography as Spatial Science’ (Billinge *et al*., 1983).

In the UK, the 1980s was dominated by the debate over geography’s potential exclusion as a core subject in the school curriculum. The then Education Secretary, Sir Keith Joseph, addressed an invited GA audience in 1985 on the place of geography in the curriculum when the subject’s fate seemed to hang in the balance. Two years later, a meeting with Sir Keith’s successor, Kenneth Baker, led to the inclusion of geography as a foundation subject. In 1989 the National Curriculum Working Group was formed to inaugurate a major period of educational reform, with key inputs from Eleanor Rawling, Rex Walford and others. Their significance in securing the subject’s place in the curriculum should be duly acknowledged. The National Curriculum was introduced in England and Wales in 1991 and was subject to vigorous debate, as captured in Eleanor Rawling’s account of *Changing the Subject* (2001), which discusses the impact of national policy on school geography over the period from 1980 to 2000.

It gets harder to write the subject’s history as we approach the present-day, but I will single out several notable contributions. They include the publication of landmark texts such as Margaret Roberts’ *Learning through Enquiry* (2003) with its powerful advocacy of student-centred learning; the ‘Valuing Places’ project, funded by the Department for International Development (DfID) and led by Diane Swift (2003–06), and the ‘Action Plan for Geography’, on which the GA worked in collaboration with the RGS-IBG (2006–11). We should also note the GA’s ‘Manifesto for Geography’, masterminded by David Lambert, which set out *A Different View* (GA, 2009) of the subject including the useful distinction between geography’s vocabulary (an almost endless list of place-names and geographical features) and its grammar (the concepts and theories through which we aim to make sense of all that detail).

Coming up to the present, recent highlights include the GA’s partnership with the Field Studies Council, the Ordnance Survey and ESRI in promoting the ‘Year of Fieldwork’ (2015–16), the ‘Global Learning Programme’, funded by DfID (2012–17), which sought to challenge conventional thinking about ‘development’ geography, and the new GCSE and A-level syllabus, introduced in 2015–16 following advice from the A-level Content Advisory Board.

To avoid too much triumphalism, we should mention current concerns about the supply of well-qualified geography teachers, signalled by the GA’s (recently updated) report on *Geography Initial Teacher Education and Teacher Supply in England* (GA, 2015). Universities are also struggling to recruit students following demographic shifts in the student-age population and a rise in the number of degree-awarding institutions offering to teach geography.

## Continuities and discontinuities

Reflecting on this sketch of our disciplinary history and the role of the GA within it, it is worth noting some continuities and discontinuities between past and present (acknowledging the inevitable selectivity of this process). How, for example, have we got from ‘social geography and its place in colonial studies’ (Gilbert and Steel, 1945) to contemporary concerns about post-colonialism (Jazeel, 2012) and debates about decolonising geographical knowledge (Radcliffe, 2017)? Historical accounts, such as Felix Driver’s *Geography Militant* (2001) (a phrase borrowed from Joseph Conrad), are helpful in tracing the contours of our geographical history, as are ‘external’ views of the discipline such as Edward Said’s (2012) assessment that:

*‘Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography … That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings’* (p. 7).

Yet, much remains to be done to acknowledge, let alone to counter, the problematic and enduring connections between geography, race and Empire – as Mona Domosh sought to demonstrate during her recent term as President of the (recently re-named) American Association of Geographers (AAG), when she asked the provocative question: ‘Why is our geography curriculum so white?’ (Domosh, 2015). The question is not so much about the ‘under-representation’ of black and minority ethnic groups in UK geography (vitally important though that is), as it is about the way our disciplinary knowledge is shaped by our racialised, gendered and socially exclusionary history. Debating these and other (dis)continuities in geography’s history would be a productive alternative to heroic accounts of the ‘progress’ of geographical thinking with its inherent tendency towards uncritical celebration and selective amnesia.

## Future challenges

Returning to the Geographical Association’s foundation in 1893, we might ask ourselves what are the key questions for the discipline today and what objectives should we set ourselves for the next few decades? What is the relationship between the universal and the particular (and how is this reflected in the choice of case studies demanded by the National Curriculum)? What topics should be compulsory for all of our students to study and what branches of knowledge should be optional? What is (or should be) the balance between human and physical geography? What is the role of fieldwork in contemporary geography? What is our current ‘mission’ as geography teachers (beyond exam success, teaching to the test and meeting our assessment targets)? How should we respond to the marketisation of education (in schools and universities)? What other objectives would we set ourselves and how might the GA help us take them forward?

## Conclusion

This account of the last 125 years has been partial in both senses of the word (incomplete and, inevitably, selective). It has been a somewhat ‘internalist’ history, despite my attempt to acknowledge the impact of wider intellectual trends and social forces in shaping our disciplinary history. I have not given much attention to the political context or to the role of changing technologies (such as the shift from lantern slides and school atlases to remote sensing and geographic information sytems). One way of addressing these issues would be to ask what similarities and differences might exist between the GA’s history and the histories of other disciplines and subject associations. However, any historical account will always be provisional, its emphases reflecting the period from which the past is viewed.

Rather than attempting to write a comprehensive overview of our subject’s history, I have chosen to ask a series of rhetorical questions about the past and present state of the discipline, including the role of what Alan Kinder likes to call our ‘community of practice’ (Kinder, 2017). The concept was originally deployed in 1991 by Lave and Wenger to describe a group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. The idea applies extremely well to subject associations such as the GA, enabling its members to see the ‘bigger picture’ through formal and informal social interaction, moving beyond the classroom to define themselves as part of a wider profession, concerned not only with delivering the curriculum but also with developing it. That is a process to which we can all subscribe, drawing on our institutional history and collective practice in order to move forward, confidently but critically, to face the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

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