

**“HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF GEOGRAPHY I: THE SLOW, THE
TURBULENT, AND THE DISSENTING”**

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History and philosophy of geography I: The slow, the turbulent, and the dissenting

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Abstract

This report takes as its prompt John K Wright's 1925 'plea for the history of geography'—an early call for an inclusive account of geographical thought and practice, embracing both professional and amateur ways of knowing. In reflecting on the extent to which contemporary histories of geography realise the scope of Wright's ambition, the paper considers how external pressures, such as neoliberalism and academia's audit culture, function to shape and constrain the writing of those histories. The paper argues for the value of 'slow' scholarship as an act of political resistance and as a *sine qua non* of nuanced and comprehensive historiography. The report concludes by examining how biographical and genealogical approaches to narrating geography's histories have important implications for the decisions made about inclusion and exclusion, about what and who counts in geography.

Keywords

biography, genealogy, geosophy, histories of geography, John K Wright, neoliberal
academia, slow scholarship

The history of geography is often regarded as a somewhat antiquarian and useless background to modern geography ... or as the harmless hobby of collectors of old maps. (Wright, 1925a: 194)

The history of geography as a whole and in its wider bearings has been neglected ... or at least it has not received the attention which any enthusiast may, perhaps, be permitted to regard as its due. (Wright, 1926: 477)

I Introduction

For much of the first half of the 1920s, John K Wright (1891-1969), then librarian of the American Geographical Society, had a bee in his bonnet. The source of Wright's irritation was the evident lack of attention paid—both by geographers and by historians of science—to the history of geographical ideas. By 1925 Wright considered his frustrations 'ripe enough to warrant presentation before professional societies', and thus he spent the Christmas vacation of that year shuttling between the meetings of the History of Science Society (at Ann Arbor) and the Association of American Geographers (at Madison), delivering a pair of papers that he hoped would set an agenda (Wright, 1966: 4). Wright's vision for the history of geography—more provocation than prescription—was one that proposed no fundamental distinction

between the professional and the lay, between the scientific and the folkloric, between the written and the oral. The history of geography, Wright argued, should range across ‘geographical ideas as they find spoken, graphic, or written expression’ irrespective of their perceived accuracy, logic, or reason (Wright, 1926: 484).

Although Wright’s scheme positioned ‘scientific geography’ (i.e., ‘ideas systematically worked out in conformity with the best intellectual standards of their age’) as the dominant focus for the history of geography, he considered non-scientific expressions of geographical thought and imagination to be equally illuminating, equally valid, and thus a vital component of the larger project (Wright, 1926: 483, 485).

Wright’s conviction that the ostensibly objective and the evidently subjective demanded parallel consideration on the part of geography’s historians was later codified in his advocacy of ‘geosophy’: a neologism coined to describe ‘the study of geographical knowledge from any or all points of view’, encompassing ‘the geographical ideas, both true and false, of all manner of people—not only geographers, but farmers and fishermen, business executives and poets, novelists and painters, Bedouins and Hottentots’ (Wright. 1947: 12).

Read from a contemporary perspective, it is, of course, tempting to see Wright’s catholic scheme for geography’s history as being ahead of its time—seeming to prefigure (or, at least, hint at) a much later scholarly concern with the embodied, situated, contingent, and constructed nature of knowledge (see Geertz, 1983; Golinski,

1998; Haraway, 1988; Keighren, 2005; Livingstone, 2003). While it is certainly the case that Wright was out-of-step with many of his contemporaries—it was not until the late-1960s and the emergence of humanistic geography that his ideas gained currency (e.g., Lowenthal and Bowden, 1976)—it is perhaps more productive, in the compass of this progress report, to reflect on the extent to which contemporary scholarship on the history and philosophy of geography reflects the breadth of Wright’s ambition and what, perhaps, yet remains to be done. Ninety years on from Wright’s ‘plea for the history of geography’, what kinds of disciplinary and subject histories do we have, what kinds of histories do we want, and what kinds of histories does the contemporary academic system allow us to tell?

II Slow scholarship and artisanal craft

Historians of geography frequently come (perhaps inevitably so) to occupy a dual position: that of scholar and custodian. In writing geography’s history, its authors become, en route, the keepers of its memory. This much is certainly true of Geoffrey J Martin, who, since the 1960s, has emerged as the leading disciplinary historian of US geography through a series of biographical monographs on some of its foremost protagonists: Mark Jefferson, Ellsworth Huntington, and Isaiah Bowman (Martin, 1968, 1978, 1980). The publication of Martin’s *American Geography and Geographers:*

Toward Geographical Science (2015) is, then, both a personal and professional landmark—the culmination not only of several decades of quiet scholarship, but also, arguably, of a particular mode of research and writing that an increasingly fast-paced and metrics-driven academic system seems no longer to desire of its practitioners.

For Martin, knowledge of the history of geography is (at least for geographers themselves) a ‘prerequisite to a larger comprehension’ and a fundamental part of the ‘saga of intellection’ that defines a practitioner’s sense of professional identity and his or her understanding of geography’s place ‘in the pantheon of both “hard” and “soft” sciences’ (Martin, 2015: xvi). In Martin’s rendering, the history of disciplinary geography is the account of a journey—of the more-or-less meandering path taken between a series of defined milestones (‘selection of a subject matter, intellectual inquiry, development of a scientific viewpoint, establishment of a profession, and formation of a discipline’) and of those individuals who pioneered the route, or who fell by the wayside (Martin, 2015: xvi). Martin’s account is, in that sense, unreservedly progressivist; it is a 1,210-page account of a discipline taking shape, identifying a common purpose, *going* somewhere.

American Geography and Geographers reveals a profoundly scholarly, yet deeply personal, commitment to its subject and its sources. The sense of Martin as a custodian of American geography’s memory is, perhaps, most obviously exemplified by his accumulation—over the course of decades—of a private research archive in his

Connecticut home. From among (by his reckoning) 115,000 sheets of paper—both unique material and transcriptions and reproductions of items housed in approximately one hundred institutional and private collections—Martin has constructed a history that, in its detail, granularity, and authoritativeness (particularly in respect to its coverage of the first half of the twentieth century), is unlikely ever to be paralleled. Martin's faith in archives as repositories of fact—he describes them as 'devoid of bias, dishonesty, and ignorance'—will, however, sit rather uneasily with scholars who have come to regard them often as quite the reverse (Burton, 2005; Martin, 2015: 1135).

That combining the role of researcher and archivist is, at times, unsettling has recently been signalled to by Trevor Barnes in his amusing account of facing down a 'monster in a box'—a corrugated cardboard wine box in which he had accumulated paperwork from more than 'five years of interviews and archive research' on the history of geography's quantitative revolution (Barnes, 2014: 202). For Barnes, his private archive became a personal burden—a source of anxiety over work unfinished and of data yet to be sifted, sorted, and understood. The archive is one of the places in which the discipline finds itself, but it is clearly also somewhere we can lose ourselves.

While Martin's reverence for his subject matter has not been subject to censure, the critical response to *American Geography and Geographers* has nevertheless been somewhat mixed and, in its identification of the book's limitations, offers some suggestion of what might still be considered wanting in our histories of geography. For

Ron Johnston, Martin's reliance upon primary material 'is both a strength and a considerable weakness'—at once enriching the account with detail but also contributing to an unevenness in coverage, most especially in respect to women geographers, that betrays the differential survival of archival and institutional records (Johnston, forthcoming). Charles Withers has, likewise, identified a limitation brought about by Martin's choice of sources: the book's focus, following its source material, is almost exclusively on disciplinary geography rather than other forms of geographical practice or ways of knowing. As Withers notes, 'There is relatively little about popular geography, about geography in the U.S. public imagination or, for the period before the Civil War, about Americans' use of geography as a form of U.S. history' (Withers, 2015: 51). What is missing from *American Geography and Geographers* is, in that sense, the Wrightian geosopic.

If not the last word on its subject, *American Geography and Geographers* might, as Ronald F Abler has suggested, very well 'be the last of its kind', at least methodologically speaking (Abler, 2015: 50). Martin's status as a 'consummate artisanal archival worker' marks him out as atypical in an Anglophone academic system that, as Eric Sheppard has highlighted, increasingly 'incentivizes short-termism: "fast" scholarship (more frequent, shorter publications, in journals with high citation counts) rather than the "slow geography" of major monographs' (Mathewson, 2015: 44; Sheppard, 2012: 3). In the British context, there is evidence for a decline in the relative

number of monographs submitted to its periodic national research evaluation events (the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the Research Excellent Framework (REF)). Although the Geography, Environmental Studies and Archaeology Sub-panel for the 2014 REF found that monographs were more likely than journal articles to achieve the highest four-star grade—reserved for work judged ‘world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour’—it also expressed concern about the ‘impact of research assessment on the continuing health of monograph publication in the discipline’ (HEFCE, 2015: 8, 32). If the neoliberal structures of academia serve now (at least in part) to disincentive work on the scale of Martin’s book—or of the specificity of Robin Butlin’s valuable recent institutional histories of geography at the University of Leeds and of the Historical Geography Research Group of the Royal Geographical Society (with Institute of British Geographers)—what might be expect from such work in the future (Butlin, 2013, 2015)?

Almost certainly, future histories of geography will increasingly be the product of collaborative rather than lone-wolf scholarship; they will be multiauthored in their composition and seek polyvocality in their selection of source materials; they will be iterative rather than definitive; they will look outside the discipline more so than within it. We should not, though, lose sight of the value of what is now being championed as ‘slow’ scholarship, nor of the craft of archival research; rather, we should celebrate such work for its empirical contribution and its political value as an act of resistance to an

assessment culture in academia that increasingly emphasises rapidity, quantity, and impactfulness beyond the academy (Berg and Seeber, 2016; Smart, Hockey and James, 2014). As Joanne Norcup (2015a; 41) has recently argued, ‘going slow’ is more than a political statement, it is often a scholarly desideratum; we need time in which to ‘coax and detect, glean and forage’. With time, in both our research and our writing, we gain humility and perspective. That Martin’s original manuscript for *American Geography and Geographers* was literally that—a handwritten document—is a delightfully scholarly raised middle finger to a neoliberal academy that would have him quicken his pace.

III Turbulence and iteration

The task of narrating geography’s history is one that depends on identifying coherence among what might otherwise seem multifarious and disassociated activities and ways of thinking. Dealing with this ‘abundance of turbulence’—even within the constraints of particular national or linguistic geographical traditions—is an iterative but also Sisyphean process, like trying to paint a portrait of a constantly fidgeting subject (Johnston and Sidaway, 2016: 389). The publication of the seventh edition of *Geography and Geographers: Anglo-American Human Geography since 1945* (2016) is, then, something like an act of defiance and, as its authors acknowledge, a triumph of

will over logic. Since its first edition in 1979 (then authored by Johnston alone), *Geography and Geographers* has functioned not only as a somewhat distanced record of the development and expression of human geography's foci and trends, but—through its use as a teaching resource—has come, for more than one generation of Anglo-American human geographers, to shape their sense of professional self. *Geography and Geographers*, in that respect, has entered the metanarrative of Anglophone human geography.

Like its near namesake—Martin's *American Geography and Geographers*—Ron Johnston and James Sidaway's *Geography and Geographers* is an account profoundly concerned with the embodied and individual nature of geographical thought. Geography's philosophy is shown, quite rightly we might conclude, to be inseparable from its practitioners, their concerns, and the social and intellectual contexts of which they were part. Biography has, as each of my predecessors has noted in their progress reports, a vibrant presence and continuing importance in scholarship on the history and philosophy of geography (e.g., Barnes, 2008, 2010; Kinna, 2016; McGeachan, forthcoming; Stott, 2016; Withers, 2007; Wulf 2015). In part, such work—exemplified most particularly by the valuable *Geographers Biobibliographical Studies* series, whose thirty-fourth volume has just been published (Lorimer and Withers, 2015) including a deeply moving biography of one of this report's previous authors, Neil Smith (Mitchell, 2015; Smith, 1990, 1992)—satisfies our collective curiosity, our nosiness, really, with

origin stories, with the factors that inspired geography's practitioners, that shaped their world view, that encouraged them in specific directions while dissuading them from others.

The value of the biographical approach has been arrestingly illustrated, for example, in recent studies of the Hungarian geographer Alexander (Sándor) Radó (1899-1981) (Győri, 2015; Heffernan, 2015). Radó's experiences during and after the Second World War—variously as geographer, intelligence officer, and prisoner—read, on the one hand, like a Graham Greene thriller, but also function as a compelling means by which the more complex story of twentieth-century Hungarian (and, indeed, more broadly communist) geography can be narrated (Győri and Gyuris, 2015). Less dramatically, indeed somewhat prosaically, elements of the post-Second World War history of Serbian geography have likewise been revealed through the biography of one of its leading hydrographers, Tomislav Rakićević (Tasić, 2015). While Tasić's account of Rakićević's life lacks the vibrancy and contextual richness of either Győri or Heffernan on Radó, its value lies in incrementally expanding Anglophone scholars' understanding of Serbian geography—a knowledge that is typically restricted to the work of its most prominent exponent, Jovan Cvijić (1865-1927).

Geographers' historical work on the Second World War, its prelude, and its Cold War aftermath, has made for some of the most compelling recent contributions to the discipline's twentieth-century history (e.g., Barnes, 2014, 2015a, 2016). In part this

is so because the conditions of war serve to make abundantly clear how, as Gyóri and Gyuris (2015: 203) note, ‘certain regimes tried to manipulate scientific disciplines to benefit their own interest, how some disciplines adapted to radical changes in political systems and adjusted their theoretical concepts to new ideologies, and what efforts these disciplines made to appear “useful” to those in power’. During wartime these processes and activities, ordinarily ones that run more-or-less benignly in the background, are suddenly made visible and often assume a life-or-death significance. At such times, geography is at its most turbulent.

Much has been done recently to elucidate the complex relationships between geography, geographers, spatial science, and the Nazi project (Barnes, 2015b; Minca and Rowan, 2015). While it has long been recognised that the geographical underpinnings of Nazi ideology—exemplified through the concepts of *lebensraum*, *volksboden*, and so on—were the result of partial and manipulated readings of Friedrich Ratzel, the outright complicity of certain twentieth-century geographers in lending academic authority to Nazi policies makes for deeply disturbing reading. Trevor Barnes’s account of how Walter Christaller (1893-1969) ‘allowed himself and his work to be used for the most regressive political ends’ is important for what it reveals about relationships between knowledge production, patronage, political power, and self-aggrandisement (Barnes, 2015b: 189). For those of us whose school geography lessons were often occupied with sketching the hexagonal lattices illustrative of Christaller’s

central place theory, the model's revealed status as the 'perfect theory for the Nazis' raises questions about the whitewashing of our disciplinary histories, and how we, as a community of practitioners, choose to deal with the dangerous, discredited, or distasteful elements of our intellectual inheritance. There is a great deal more to be said about geography under the auspices, and in the service, of Nazi ideology and the just-published collection *Hitler's Geographies: The Spatialities of the Third Reich* (Giaccaria and Minca, 2016), that I shall cover in the next report, promises to add significantly to our understanding.

III Descent and dissent

The biographical impulse that continues to characterise much historical scholarship on geography (e.g., Ferretti, 2015) is one frequently linked with another instinctive concern: the genealogical. The desire, at least in respect to geography's *disciplinary* history, to trace lines of intellectual descent, if only to write ourselves into that family structure, is a palpable one, but, as Lorimer and Withers (2015: 5) caution, is alone insufficient: 'To chart a subject's life and work according to the academic equivalent of patrilineal bloodline may be factually accurate in specific instances, but when too closely adhered to it may risk the resulting narrative being narrowly reductionist or worse still, simply plain. It takes more than a father to make a family'.

Another concern with what Lorimer and Withers (2015: 5) call the ‘dendritic model’ of historiography is its capacity for writing out the familial ‘black sheep’: lopping off particular branches of the family tree that represent, for contemporaries, undesirable ideologies or outmoded ways of thinking. Geography’s disciplinary family—if we are to consider that a useful way of imagining its community, particularly in light of feminist critiques that have exposed geographers’ tendency to trace ‘paternal lines of descent’ in ways that obscure the role of women (Rose, 1995: 414)—is one that includes both favourites and rogues, the admirable and the despicable, the conformists and the dissenters. While such categories are, by their very nature, relative rather than absolute, varying with time and between disciplinary contexts, we arguably stand to gain more for an inclusive approach than we do from engaging in historiographical topiary.

The familial is, of course, not the only way in which the development of a collective identity or common purpose in geography might be revealed. Recent work has shown, for example, that there is still value in the national as a scale of explanation and a mode of narration (e.g., Dulamă and Ilovan, 2015; Oldfield and Shaw, 2015, 2016; Shaw, 2015). A great deal can be learned, too, about geography’s practitioners through attention to the, occasionally transient, periods when a shared political or pedagogical cause brought them together in association and communal practice (e.g., Norcup, 2015b). In respect of geography’s pre-disciplinary history, its textual and visual

products have long offered important insights into the development of common ways of knowing, into what it meant to think geographically, to imagine and represent space, for particular social groups at specific historical moments (e.g., Stock, 2016; Young, 2015). The last year has seen the coincidental publication of a number of innovative studies of Classical geography—what we might describe as ancient geosophy—from scholars working in and between geography, history, and classics.

Geography's status as an ancient practice and way of knowledge making (as the world's second-oldest profession) has, for contemporary practitioners, been used to some effect when seeking to defend the discipline's position in the modern academy (Dunbar, 2001). Despite there being rhetorical value in geography's venerability, existing scholarship on its Classical origins has been somewhat limited in amount. This relative paucity is explained, in part, by the small number of surviving textual sources on which our understanding is based; as Roller (2015: 4) has noted, 'Only four geographical handbooks are extant from antiquity, a poor showing of the nearly 250 known Greek and Roman geographers, most of whom are known solely through quotations from later authors, or by name alone'. It is, perhaps, all the more remarkable, then, that in the period covered by this report two edited collections (Barker *et al.*, 2016; Bianchetti *et al.*, 2015)—together comprising thirty-four individual chapters—and two monographs (della Dora, 2016; Roller, 2015) have been published that add materially to our knowledge of geography as it was practised in the ancient world. These works serve

also to nuance our understanding of the relationship (and frequent discontinuities) between ancient and modern ways of seeing and representing the world (see also Geus and Thiering, 2014).

Among such an abundance of valuable work (much of it a testament to the continuing vigour of ‘slow’ scholarship) it is difficult, as the restrictions of this report necessarily demand, to single out a specific contribution, but Veronica della Dora’s *Landscape, Nature, and the Sacred in Byzantium* (2016) stands out as a particularly rich example of what is to be gained by asking how the ancients understood their relationship with the natural world, how they engaged with and perceived space, and how they imagined and represented the geographies of which they were part. Indeed, della Dora’s study is attentive to the relationship between the sacred and the geographical in shaping how the Byzantine imagination perceived particular landscapes and physical features—gardens, caves, mountains, and rivers, among other *topi*. By bringing together geographical and patristic sources, della Dora (2016: 258) outlines in her book what she calls ‘Byzantine ways of seeing’: perspectives that ‘did not view geography, theology, and natural philosophy as disconnected branches of knowledge ... [but] as parts of a same whole’. In explaining how the Byzantine pious understood the world—how they thought about geography between the scale of the *topos* and the *cosmos*—della Dora has produced a work in which a concern for geosophy and

geopiety is writ large. Of this, John K Wright—who explored related themes for medieval Europe (Wright, 1925b)—would certainly have approved.

IV Conclusion

On the fiftieth anniversary of Wright's plea for a history of geography, William A Koelsch surveyed the contemporary field and found it, largely, to be 'still *terra incognita*' (Koelsch, 1976: 79). Forty years further on, where do we stand?

Notwithstanding the fact that the sub-discipline of the history and philosophy of geography lacks certain markers of intellectual status and permanence (it has no dedicated, international peer-reviewed journal for example), scholarship in this area is—as this report argues—abundant, creative, and, increasingly, written by non-geographers. The whiff of antiquarianism that might once have characterised the task of narrating geography's disciplinary and discursive histories has been gainsaid by an expanding range of empirically rich, contextually aware work that shows geographical thought and practice to be, always, constructed, contingent, and contested. Chronicling geography is no harmless hobby.

Nine decades of scholarship has done much to satisfy Wright's plea; a sub-discipline has taken shape, a significant literature has evolved, understandings of geography's nature, place, and role have become both fuller and more subtle. It is clear,

however, that the vibrancy and value of work on the history and philosophy of geography depends fundamentally upon us *not* being satisfied by what we currently have—however authoritative, however comprehensive—but always, greedily, asking for more. Our shared goal as historians of geography should not be definitiveness but nuance; our task is not to agree a particular narrative, but to disrupt established accounts and to find new ways of telling our stories. Progress in the history and philosophy of geography is defined by revealing and revelling in geography’s messiness, complexity, and relativism. Ours is not a simple story, plainly told.

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