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Geography and the Future

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ABSTRACT: This address starts with the premise that 'geography is everywhere'. Human beings' innate curiosity about their surroundings and environment must be stimulated by teachers, not repressed. Brief reviews are presented on the state of geography in schools, in the current core curriculum debate, and in public perception and the media: geography nowadays treads a precarious path and seems to be poorly represented in the corridors of power. Those concerned with geographical education in the future face three challenges: the need to respond to curricular initiatives originating from outside geography; the need to improve geography's public image; and the need to integrate the community of geography teachers and academics for more effective action. The importance of the future impinges more and more on the geography of the present: this too should be reflected in our teaching.

It is ironic that in 1984 the Big Brother whom we cannot escape appears to be George Orwell. Articles about him are everywhere. So let me make the necessary obeisance and search no further than the first paragraph of Nineteen Eighty-Four (Orwell, 1949, p. 5):

It was a bright cold day in April and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped swiftly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him.

What possible relevance is this brief quote to a Presidential Address at a conference on geography? Every possible relevance. The paragraph is an exemplary lexicon of the elements which form the basis of our subject.

The bright cold day in April (ah, an anti-cyclone over the North Sea); the clocks striking thirteen (yes, yet another cherished British institution has been changed following our entry into the EEC); Winston Smith (the case study of humankind); Victory Mansions (the regretted tower-blocks, symbol of the emergent townscape); the swirl of gritty dust, the vile wind (the environmental base – geology and synoptic weather). Is such simple textual analysis deluded overclaim? I respond only with the graffiti recorded on a bridge near Bedworth in Warwickshire: 'Geography is everywhere'.

Geography in the present

If we translate that sentiment 'geography is everywhere' into some kind of realistic principle for geographical education, it might be this: that we ought to base our teaching on the realisation that, for all its theories, concepts and ideas, the essence of the subject is in the elements of the world around us as we variously perceive and order them, and that an interest in these elements ought to be a fundamental curiosity of an educated person. How extraordinary if our teaching contrives to make the world unreal or, worse still, boring.

Most of us are geographers and geography teachers because of the nurturing of that curiosity about our surroundings, however we dignify it intellectually, or however we subsequently shape it towards moral and social purposes. Our essential role in schools, both primary and secondary, and in colleges too, is at least to stimulate and inform that curiosity in those whom we teach. Perhaps the greatest sadness we should know is to have students pass from our classes unmotivated to further investigate the world around them; students who in later life will be sedentary or tunnel-visioned, cocooned in weekly Bingo, and who respond to the stories of the lately-travelled only with a bland inconsequence.

Sometimes this stimulation happens quite naturally – in spite of, rather than because of, the teaching we do. As W.J. Turner's (1939, p. 1) simple poem 'Romance' puts it:

When I was but thirteen or so
I went into a golden land
Chimborazo, Cotopaxi
Took me by the hand

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My father died, my brother too
They passed like fleeting dreams
I stood where Popacatapetl
In the sunlight gleams

I dimly heard the master's voice
And boys, far off at play,
Chimborazo, Cotopaxi
Had stolen me away...

To others it may not happen at school, but much later in life. Consider this extract from the writings of a well-known public figure, whose education at school was orientated towards Latin and Greek, rather than to geography:

I like a landscape with mountains. No view to me is wholly satisfying without some distant elevation. For several years I enjoyed the Mourne Mountains in the beautiful constituency which, in my declining years, I have the privilege to represent; but I enjoyed them passively, visually, uncritically. Then suddenly – I think it was when contemplating one day the complex geometric patterns of the stone boundary walls on a mountain side – I said to myself 'There must be some comprehensible discoverable explanation for all that'.

From that moment the nature of my pleasure was altered and enhanced; the landscape was peopled with problems, doubts, questions, puzzlements. I became an enthusiastic amateur of field patterns, settlement history, a dabbler in geology, a traveller in search of ever more answers to ever more questions. The very walls themselves have become the objects of nice inspection for the sake of the historic and economic queries they can raise. Now probably no question I could ask has not been asked a hundred times before. The chance of my hitting on a new question, let alone a fresh answer, must be remote. Never mind, I am still in enjoyment of a new and inexhaustible zest. (Powell, 1983)

Thus belated – though it seems he still does not know it by name – Enoch Powell has come to add geography to his love of the classics.

Powell's articulate recapitulation of a single moment may not be the way that most of us can describe the genesis of our interest in geography, but there is surely a moment or a period somewhere in our lives when something stirred us. Or at least, I hope there is. Otherwise it may be a very pedestrian and pragmatic attachment which we have to the subject.

Was it the exhilaration of a hill-top view, a youthful passion for railways or aviation, the stimulus of an overseas holiday, a travel book recommended by an enthusiastic teacher, or an old book of maps discovered in the attic? Somewhere along the way, I suggest, there has been a formative influence for most of us; and the subsequent rationalising of our career intentions and our progress stem, in some part, from that.

If I search my own life-history I can go as far back as an early childhood memory of having The Wind in the Willows read to me, and of seeing the map which was its frontispiece. I remember how it caught my imagination. It was probably before I could read properly – an individual corroboration of the research of Blaut and Stea (1974) and others that graphicacy can precede literacy and be a potent form of communication for children long before they go to school. The frontispiece was not quite a map, but more an oblique sketch picture; whatever its graphic ambiguities, I remember being fascinated by it and by the locations of the homes of the animals who peopled the story – Mole's House, Ratty's home on the River Bank, Toad Hall, and deep in the heart of the Wild Wood, the home of Mr Badger. I think it was that which led me to a fascination with maps and then with the elements of the real landscape (later on it was plentifully fuelled by the verse of John Betjeman). I understand that these days, historical structural analysis in literary circles sees The Wind in the Willows as a mediation of a period's ambivalence to capitalism and a plea for a nostalgic return to a feudal society. But to me, at the age of four, it was just a graphic evocation of place and a fantasy full of reality.

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Beyond the Wild Wood

Essentially The Wind in the Willows is a rural idyll – and heresy lies amongst the charm:

'What is beyond the Wild Wood again?' asked the Mole. 'Where it's all blue and dim and ones sees what may be hills, or perhaps they mayn't, and something like the smoke of towns, or is it only cloud-drift?'
'Beyond the Wild Wood comes the Wide World' said the Rat, 'And that's something that doesn't matter, either to you or me. I've never been there and I'm never going there, nor you, if you've got any sense at all. Don't ever refer to it again, please.' (Grahame, 1938, pp. 13–14)

Ratty's attitude stimulates two reflections:

i) To ignore the Wide World and to concentrate on those bits of local geography which are personally appealing (and also probably uncontroversial) is to take a deeply regressive stance. Recent writing, some of it from radical perspectives, has emphasised how complex and deeply political it is to attempt explanations of what happens on earth's surface; that is no reason for withdrawing from the consideration of difficult issues. The recession in the British economy, the disparity of living standards across the world, the particular situations in the Middle East, Central America and South Africa, are all significant matters in the global context and are not to be avoided, however uncomfortable it may be to raise them and however ill-prepared with practical classroom strategies we may presently be.

   But in the context of these considerations, I would offer a caveat about the role of the teacher in conducting a discussion which involves exposure of attitudes and values in the classroom. Though neutrality is impossible and some bias inevitable, I believe that our role as professionals in a liberal educational tradition requires that we should still strive for impartiality in most of the contentious issues which we handle. (I except opposition racism and sexism from this.) The zeal with which we may propagate individual causes in our personal lives may not necessarily be appropriate if carried direct into the classroom. And I have similar concern if such causes are espoused by local authority edict also, since what is sauce for the Brent geese is equally sauce for the Solihull gander. The developing centralism of educational policy may eventually lead to much argument unproductive to better teaching, as well as to less responsiveness to individual needs.

ii) It is unfortunate if geography stays on the River Bank and in the Wild Woods and fails to relate them to the Wide World. One of the strengths of the subject is its holism, its inter-connectedness, its power to make sense of whole situations by its demonstration of relationships – physical with human, local with regional, national with international. In a world dominated by specialists, the generalist sits uncomfortably, and he or she needs to be aware of gross superficiality and of indigestible gazeteering. But the generalist is needed and one of geography's most valuable current assets is its long tradition of synthesis and eclecticism in developing both description and explanation of environments as a whole.

In enlarging the context of geography we serve the whole public. Or we should. One does not have to search inexhaustibly in order to find the term 'geography' in unpretentious, practical use. The world knows the term beyond the school classrooms.

For the first three days in the week preceding this address, I determined to keep my ears and eyes open for the everyday use of the word 'geography' in newspapers, radio and television.

On Monday, April 9th, the Yorkshire miners' flying pickets evaded the police waiting for them at the north Nottinghamshire border, and instead, as BBC radio put it, 'swept in by surprise from the west' (rather like a young Lochinvar). The miners' ability to avoid the police patrols was attributed to 'a greater local knowledge of the geography of the area' – an indirect compliment, I take it, to the local study and map skills taught in the schools of Sheffield and Barnsley.

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On Tuesday, April 10th, BBC TV Newsnight carried a major interview with an academic from Bradford University. He was critical of a recent American report which sought to justify relative levels of armaments by simple weapon-counting. The first of many factors which he sought to take into account was captioned as 'geography' and presenter John Tusa questioned him closely about this. The academic made the point that Russia had great anxiety in needing to defend an extensive land frontier which had already been invaded twice this century; he contended that this made the Russians believe that they always needed to have considerable superiority in numbers over the USA, whom they saw as enjoying a more insular and protectable position.

On Wednesday, April 11th, the correspondence columns of Motor-Cycle News carried an articulate letter from Miss Samantha Warman of Lyme Regis. I quote:

When I was at school, geography was one of my favourite subjects. It certainly can't have been so for the members of the Speedway Control Board. Or perhaps their budget doesn't stretch to a map of our island? If it did, they would realise that the proposed World Final venue at Odsal Stadium, Bradford, is so far out on a limb that it doesn't bear thinking about.

She goes on to make the quite sophisticated point that it is not Bradford's general centrality which is in question, but its nodality in relation to the 40 or so other speedway tracks in Britain – only three of which lie within a 100-mile radius of the Yorkshire city. (Before you consign this as an irrelevancy from a minority-interest weekly, let me point out that in all probability, more copies of Motor-Cycle News are read in school time than either the Times, Guardian or Telegraph.)

These three examples are eloquent variations in the everyday use and perception of geography – its use in providing local orientation, its significance in the global geo-political scene and its value in defining desirable centres for recreational activity.[1] If these particular contexts are not ones which interest or appeal to us as educators, then so much the worse for us. This is the way the general public (ex-school-pupils themselves, let us remember) perceive and use the term 'geography'. So much the worse for us, if we do not recognise the links between such everyday usage and what we do in schools. Let us not become imprisoned in small sectors of the subject, or dismiss its application to untraditional content. And I think we should stop worrying and learn to love the National Geographic. It is the general usage of the idea of geography that represents the greatest hope for the continuation of it in the curriculum. Teaching geography should not be the forcing of an unwanted subject on to unwilling receivers, but the generating of interest in a dimension which influences the actions and explanations of everyday life.

To experience and work towards the understanding of such a dimension is, I believe, a fundamental part of every child's education. In the years beyond the infant school, when concern for personal needs recedes from dominant emphasis, children begin to explore the world in which they live and to construct a relationship to it. The dimensions of world space, and time, and of the spirit, are respectively the dominant heritage of geography, history and religious education and no properly educated person should lack the opportunity to explore those dimensions in a coherent and sustained way. That seems to me to be the philosophical grounding of school geography. Knowledge about the world is not gained in a particular form (in the Hirstian sense); but it coheres through something more than a convenience of adjacent content.

Space and time are inter-related, as Professor Lawton reminded us in his 1983 Presidential Address (Lawton, 1983), and history and geography do overlap, just as do geography and science, and geography and literature. But, in my judgement, it is dangerously inadequate to believe that a timetable slot labelled 'Humanities' in the secondary school will necessarily identify and clarify these dimensions in a satisfactory way and give insight into them. Valuable though the impulse to inter-related and integrated work is, I view with concern that impetus in curriculum planning which seeks to use 'Humanities' to supplant the teaching of geography or history.

I also doubt the validity of the view which suggests that the study of geography or history is acceptable from the age of 14 onwards – a decision born from pragmatism rather than principle in hard-pressed situations. In my opinion, both subjects are necessary, if well taught, up to the age of 16. It was encouraging to see the House of

Commons' Select Committee on the Secondary School make the same point in subjecting the DES (1981) document The School Curriculum to analysis. Paragraph 22 of the DES report had said: 'History, geography and economics serve to give the pupil an insight into the nature of society (including his own) and man's place in his environment.' The Select Committee commented: 'We regard this kind of statement as precisely of the kind which government (or for that matter any informed person) should avoid ... The lumping together of such different subject areas as "history, geography and economics" as if they were in some way interchangeable does no service to education, nor to the credibility of the authors' (House of Commons Education, Science and Arts Committee, 1982).

The state of the subject in schools

But if we are to justify a school geography for the future, can we do so by reference to observable quality? By reference to its general health and vigour in schools at the present time? In what state is geography? Weak and ailing? Vibrant and healthy?

If examination statistics are any clue, the position is tolerable. At A-level it currently stands at eighth most popular examination entry, having dropped one place in popularity in the last 20 years, with economics now greatly stronger in entry numbers than it was in 1961, and biology also; French has dropped below it in popularity in that time. Relative to history, geography has improved its share of the market since 1961, though not to many other subjects. In 16 examinations (O-level and CSE) it stands equal third with biology in popularity, according to the most recently available full statistics[2]; only the twin basics of English and maths stand out, well ahead of the field. This is an improvement on seventh place in the rank order in 1961, and fifth place in 1971. Whether the future trends will favour the subject, given other pressures now current in the education system, is much more problematic.

But what of the image of the subject? Are we popular because a CSE in geography is perceived as a 'soft option'? Our colleague, the editor of the American teachers' journal, Journal of Geography (published by the NGCE and revitalised under the new editorship), recently commented on the situation in American schools: 'At the elementary level, instruction in geography, especially by specialist geography teachers, has almost ceased to exist. In secondary schools, geography is the dustbin of the curriculum ...' (de Souza, 1984, p. 3). Could that happen here?

Adrian Mole, aged 13¾, that popular figure of current literary interest, has provided some recent evidence for us from his secret diary (Townsend, 1982, pp. 60–1). His references to geography come coincidentally at the very end of Spring Term – that fatiguing period through which we have all recently passed.

Friday, April 3rd. Got full marks in the geography test today. Yes! I am proud to report that I got twenty out of twenty! I was also complimented on the neat presentation of my work. There is nothing I now don't know about the Norwegian leather industry.

Sunday, April 5th. Nigel came round this morning. He is still mad about Pandora. I tried to take his mind off her by talking about the Norwegian leather industry, but somehow I couldn't get him interested ...

If geography is like that, it is not surprising that Nigel and many others can't get interested. On the other hand, I doubt we can build a stable or satisfactory place in the school curriculum by constructing syllabuses so full of issues or the hoped-for clarification or transmission of values and attitudes that there is little time for the development of any knowledge about the world in which we live. If pupils don't know the land from the oceans on a map, however can they exercise any meaningful understanding of themselves as global citizens? If they have no idea of who is in the Third World and who is not, how can they be concerned for its welfare? If they have no knowledge of what the Amazon environment once was and how it functioned, how can they be made to care about the rape of its forests? It was this kind of concern which led the GA into setting up the Worldwise Quiz competition a year ago; and it has been gratifying to see how quickly it has received support and interest.

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But a quiz competition is the right place for that kind of basic work. It would be unfortunate if it were instated as a centre-piece of the geography curriculum. What it represents is the bottom layer in the pyramid of building blocks. And what it must lead towards is active participatory learning both in the field and in the classroom (yes, I still believe in games and simulations); towards the development of self-motivated investigation and study of the environment; and towards informed discussion and debate about current relevant national and global issues. In many geography classrooms that does happen, and it is that, in many schools, which explains its present strength in the curriculum. But it doesn't happen in all schools.

Earlier this year, I wrote to over a hundred of my former students who have been on the geography PGCE course in Cambridge during the past ten years. Amongst other things, I asked them how they were finding life in the schools in which they were teaching, and to tell me, as frankly as they dare, whether they felt happy about the state of the subject in schools. It was, I suppose, a very unsympathetic poll, but at least a toe dipped in to test the temperature of the current educational waters. It was good to find that most of the replies were positive. For instance:

I am pleased to report our department is buoyant at the moment; we are pleased with our recently developed lower-school course and our 14–18 Project O-level/CSE joint syllabus makes us the most popular option in the 4th and 5th year. Geography is also the most popular 6th form option at A-level. The other members of the department are up-to-date and although we all have different teaching styles, the department is like-minded in purpose ...

It is not all wine and roses, however. The cloak of anonymity blessedly covers this response from another student somewhere in Britain:

Thank you for your letter; you have stirred a somewhat dwindling flame of enthusiasm ... I have not been here long, but if ever a department needs a good shake-up it is this one. If the PGCE course failed to prepare me for anything it was to teach out-of-date regional courses with appalling resources in a totally chaotic department ...

It is not difficult to postulate the fate of geography in these two schools in the years ahead, if nothing changes. Unprotected by the umbrella of the core curriculum, geography will make or lose its way by the individual health of the subject in each school and by the efforts of its practitioners. In the first school, geography's popularity will enable members of staff who leave to be replaced by others; the department will continue to innovate; and geography will maintain a strong presence in the school's total curriculum. In the second school, the department will contract in staff size; it will remain moribund in teaching style; and gradually, geography will be eased from the timetable in favour of those options which gather support and enthusiasm for whatever other reasons.

Walking the tightrope

Given the current situation in the debates about the curriculum, which effectively began with the James Callaghan Ruskin College speech in 1976, geography treads a precarious path. It has remained relatively invisible in most of the debates. A subject which has incontrovertible value? Or a subject of little importance?

Geography was excluded from the much-publicised first clutch of HMI papers which reported on the 11–16 curriculum, though excellently represented in a later supplementary paper (Geography Committee of HMI, 1981); it had only a perfunctory mention as a supplementary subject on the last page of A Framework for the School Curriculum (DES, 1980). It was fractionally more visible in the subsequent policy document published by the DES The School Curriculum (DES, 1981), perhaps partly as a result of GA representations on the matter, but it was again excluded from the first batch of subjects to be considered by the Secretary of State in relation to the 16+ examinations (and that despite excellent and progressive sets of criteria prepared and widely agreed within the geographical education community). On the other hand, the Secondary Examinations Council has recently agreed to include geography as one of the subjects to be initially considered in relation to grade-related criteria for assessment at 16+.

But the plain fact remains that concern about geography has not so far been a major issue in the debate about 'education for national efficiency'. This is in striking contrast to a similar debate which went on in this country in

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the years following the Boer War. Indeed, the LSE included geography as a subject for study as a counter to the outmoded curriculum of the older universities, and because the Webbs and Hewins, the first Director, saw it as a significant element in a modern education. Sir Harold Mackinder was one of the early Directors of the LSE.

In 1946, Sir Cyril Norwood was President of the GA. Author of one of the major educational reports of twentieth-century Britain, he spoke of the place of geography in the post-war curriculum in his 1946 Presidential Address:

I therefore want you to make the bold claim that geography is an essential part of education whatever forms education may take and there can be no question of dropping it in any considered course of study; it is in my opinion, more important than a foreign language or a science, highly important as these are, for the simple reason ... that the intelligent person must understand something about the world and the country and the district in which he is set to live his life. (Norwood, 1946)

Bold claims indeed, and made by a figure of considerable educational influence at that time. Should we make such claims now? Do we make them? And if so, do we make them effectively?

In contrast, in the current debate, geography seem to have had relatively few vocal friends in or around the corridors of power to represent it; or indeed to represent the view which would benefit it and other subjects more generally – i.e. that education is much more than a preparation for work and that a debate which narrows it to that over-riding premise is one which seriously diminishes other long-cherished concerns for individuals to be prepared both for personal responsibility and active citizenship within a democratic society.

Geography, so to speak, walks the tightrope at present – able and nimbly enough to maintain its balance for the most part, but uncomfortably aware that these days no safety net hangs below to break the fall if a false step is made. Of course, the secret of the tightrope walker is not to look nervously backwards over his shoulder, or to freeze and do nothing; the secret of success is to step forward boldly and maintain momentum. And so it should be for us geography teachers. This is no time for indolence or faint-heartedness, or freezing on the rope – however inadequate the balancing poles provided.

A school geography for the future?

The past decade gave us the luxury of debating the kind of geography we wished to teach; but in the eighties the focus has changed. The debate is now about whether geography should or should not be taught at all. Will there be a school geography in the future?

In the second half of this address I want to suggest that those concerned with geographical education face a number of immediate challenges, and that action is needed to face those challenges; it is this which needs to give us the impulse to walk forward on the tightrope. Firstly, there is a need to respond promptly to particular curricular initiatives which come from sources outside the discipline. Secondly, there is a need to be concerned about the image of the subject and to be active in propagating that image in realistic terms. Thirdly, there is a need to develop the integration of resources within the community of scholars and teachers who have trained as geographers. Initiatives, images, integration – three crucial themes. Let me develop them a little further.

The need to respond to curriculum initiatives

Although the curriculum in England and Wales has traditionally been conservative in its structural evolution, there is no doubt that we live in times in which unprecedented amount of change is being initiated external to the individual school. Such initiatives come not only from pressure groups of various kinds, but more significantly from the Department of Education and Science and from bodies which have their origins (and their financial resources) outside the education system – the Department of Industry and the Manpower Services Commission, for instance. Whatever suspicions we may have of such initiatives, it is probably impractical to ignore them or actively oppose them. To wave back the tide of MSC money is to behave like Canute.

One important initiative is the rapid development of a Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE) as a 17+ qualification. The nature of the common core of courses advocated in the Mansell report (FEU, 1977) challenges

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in detail the dominance of subject-based courses in this sphere. Some regard the scheme as narrowing and socially divisive; its character may eventually depend on who validates it. But there are opportunities within the proposed core courses ('Industrial, Social and Environmental Studies') and in the 'Additional Studies' section for geographers to make considerable contributions; a recent article by Sheila Nuttall (1984a) in the ILEA Geography Bulletin gives a practical example from a pilot CPVE course, and the Education Standing Committee of the GA also has the matter currently under active review.

A second initiative relates to the fast proliferation of TVEI Projects (Technical and Vocational Education Initiative) in certain areas. TVEI is a five-year pilot scheme funded by the MSC to stimulate the provision of technical and vocational education for some 14–18 year olds. Again, there are reservations about its re-introduction of selection in the secondary school, but if the more optimistic pronouncements are to be believed there is room for geographers to offer work within the Project to broaden the scope of 'Being better equipped to enter the world of work'. Some individual geography teachers have already become involved – many more need to do so.

The Youth Training Scheme (YTS) for unemployed school leavers includes a component which specifies that trainees should learn about 'the world outside employment'; there are hopes that graphicacy skills may be specifically included in future checklists of skills. There are also opportunities for geographers to teach in the 'off-the-job Training/Education' section of the proposed courses.[3]

16+ and AS-level proposals are perhaps currently overshadowed, and indeed in tension with the above initiatives, but if these are implemented, geographers can make important contributions; geography would stand to gain more than many other subjects if the curriculum was widened in the sixth form to include AS-levels alongside A-levels.

The GA has sought through the last few months to encourage the Secretary of State to make some kind of public statement about the place of geography within the curriculum. We have had little success so far, but at least some of Sir Keith Joseph's other recent utterances imply that the worst fears of those who abhor vocational narrowness, or central direction, will not be realised:

The curriculum should be relevant to the real world and to the pupil's experience of it; we aim to teach existing subjects in ways which bring out their practical use in living and working.[4]
I seek neither a prescription for what goes on in the classroom, nor a national syllabus, but a new framework within which the professional commitment and free-ranging skill of our teachers can be put to best effect.[5]

It seems to me that the mentality of the laager is inappropriate in this situation; we need to be not jealously defensive, but opportunistically active in seeking to teach cross-curricula modules for new courses, and in making ad hoc contributions from the considerable resource of the geography curriculum.

Already the considerable work of the 16–19 Project in broadening out from its original A-level intentions has provided background information and exemplars for work in this field.[6] The GA booklet on the contribution of geography to 17+ courses (just one of a whole sequence of useful publications from the last few years) is essential preliminary reading to those who venture away from O-level and A-level teaching for the first time (Geographical Association, 1982). We can also look forward with confidence to a substantial contribution from the GA Geography, Schools and Industry Project, which is just being launched with high hopes.[7]

Another certain external pressure in the near future is the proposal to identify specific objectives for subjects at particular ages – a cause also espoused with vigour by Sir Keith Joseph. You may think, as I do, that it is by no means easy for geographers to do that – but we do know enough about children's mental development and about the map of concepts which the 'new geography' has helped to lay out for us, to be sure that some things must come before others and to give examples of work progression. If we cannot do this, do we have a subject worth a name?

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It would be as well if the most informed and innovative thinkers in geography set their minds to this task, rather than leave it to be belatedly stitched together by some bureaucratic hacks from a back room in the subject. The Education Standing Committee of the GA seeks to tackle that task with immediacy; it needs your contribution.

The need to attend to the image of the subject

A second immediate challenge comes in the need to attend to the image of the subject in the light of recent external pressures on it.

A recent infamous 'Stop the Week' radio programme savaged the subject in various ways. 'Geography ranks low in the hierarchy of acceptable subjects', opined Robert Robinson; 'geography teachers seem consumed by some inward rage, perhaps through a life spent in the Doldrums. What other subject offers such a minimum of speculation, such limitless savannas of unleavened fact?' Milton Shulman and Laurie Taylor joined in with their usual brand of jocular iconoclasm, and it was left to philosopher Roger Scruton to enter a defence of the subject – largely, one gathered, because his sister was married to a geographer.

Only a few days ago, Germaine Greer on TV was commenting 'The world's a wonderful place; how can geography teachers make it so boring?'. This, in the midst of one of those late-night chat shows which depend on personal anecdote leavened by hyperbole to entertain the studio audience.

Letters to newspapers, viewpoints expressed by parents and governors based on their past experiences, unguarded asides by head teachers, also sometimes reveal a view of the subject in schools which is at best naïve, and at worst, totally erroneous and archaic.

It is not enough to shrug these off with a sigh and surmise that it is fortunate that we know better than those who make the comments; belatedly we are becoming aware that the public image does matter. As the impact of the Taylor Report and the 1981 Education Act bring outsiders into more significant discussion of individual school curricula (and even to influence and control them) the layman's view cannot be dismissed lightly.

A recently formed joint committee of the RGS and the GA has begun to address itself to the general problems of the image of geography, but much needs to be done with urgency. Some groups in public life are assiduous in responding to comments in the media, whether at national or local level. I wish that we could find the collective will to depute at least one selected officer of the national organisations to systematically and exhaustively monitor such comments and respond positively to them. To have them belatedly reported to our committees months later is better than nothing, but not usually productive of fruitful reply. At the local level we all need to be alert to the public relations task which is needed for the good things which geographers and geography students do. If a parents' evening gives an opportunity for subjects to display their wares, it is worth the extra time and trouble to prepare a sheet of A4 on the geography syllabus and to demonstrate some of the classroom methodologies. If the head teacher or the Director of Curriculum shows signs of vagueness about the subject, we need to make sure that a concise memorandum is on the desk next morning to refute the murmured aside – and an invitation extended to visit a lesson or two the following week. If students (from primary through to sixth-form level) are doing interesting local projects and fieldwork, we need to let the local radio station or local paper know. There are often columns or minutes of blank space to fill at the last minute in the local media, and good news stories from schools have high priority.

All this is not special pleading or unfair tactics – it is merely a strategy to ensure that when decisions about the future of geography in schools (and particularly geography staffing in schools) are taken by non-geographers, they will be approached on good evidence and not on recollection, imagination and hearsay.

The need for image-making is sometimes thought to be a highly arcane and somewhat unsavoury activity, smacking of sharp advertising practice, but it is not necessarily so. We have good evidence within our own academic discipline in recent years of the importance of images. If we need to understand images of the city and of landscapes in order to comprehend human activity and lifestyles, so too do we need to pay attention to the images of intellectual disciplines as perceived by other people. The subject has lacked a David Bellamy or an

Attenborough to capture the public imagination so far; we figure too infrequently in the feature spaces or letter columns of national newspapers; we show too little interest in some of the spatial and environmental issues which capture the headlines and public imagination, however briefly – Sizewell, Sellafield, Stanstead.

2000 documents were submitted to the public enquiry into the proposal to build the third London Airport at Stanstead; as far as I could discover, only two of these were specifically from geographers. (Other geographers may have been active behind the scenes, but their participation was invisible.) The case put by the North of England Regional Consortium – an inherently geographical case urging greater development of regional airports to correct regional imbalance – was argued by economists, engineers and accountants. Is it that no geographer in the North was sufficiently interested or informed to advise or be part of this consortium? I cannot believe so. Is it rather that opportunities were not grasped, initiatives not taken, in an area central to public concern?

The need to integrate the subject's resources

Thirdly, the need to stand together. It is well-known that the Peanuts comic-strip is the special ingredient which periodically invigorates the fount of geographical wisdom. There is one story in which Lucy goes to Charlie Brown and politely asks him if she can change channels on the TV; Charlie twice refuses, curtly. Lucy, sizing up the situation, then thrusts her tiny clenched fist under Charlie's nose; Charlie, taken aback, allows her to change the channel. As Lucy sits down to watch, her purposes achieved, Charlie examines his own spread five fingers and muses 'Why can't you guys get organised like that?'.

Exactly. 'Why can't you guys get organised like that?' In a time of economic difficulty and unprecedented contraction in education, it is counter-productive for each of us to shelter in our stock cupboard or tutorial room and go on working quietly, trying to pretend that the alarm bells are not ringing.

I do not imply that getting organised is seeing everyone else as hostile; there are many occasions on which we should, and can, make common cause with other disciplines and operate on a broad base. It may not be the frame but the essence of the subject which we seek to preserve within a curriculum. There was never greater need for the GA, the IBG and the RGS to draw together in common purpose in geography and also to include within the discussion other organisations which share a common concern for the subject, from whatever their particular viewpoints. A working coalition of geographic opinion and activity is necessary – a 'cordiality of geographers' in Professor Mead's (1982, p. 201) evocative phrase – to cohere the discipline around its essentials, to examine its practices and make them relevant, to stimulate it towards immediate action.

And, if on the one hand, we ask academic geographers to fulfil responsibilities to schools, to the 'seed-corn' of the subject, to give time to help with in-service courses, teachers' conferences, individual schools; so too, on the other hand, we must ask school teachers to fully utilise the resources that their colleagues in higher education can provide, so that work in schools is intellectually respectable, critically considered and well informed. But we also need to encourage solidarity and mutual support at the local level. Given the current pressures on schools, I cannot conceive of a more cogent reason for geography teachers to participate in local group activities – whether co-ordinated by local teachers and in-service centres, or through the voluntary organisation of a GA branch. There are signs that statutory in-service provision is becoming more sparse in some areas and so the need for the GA itself to develop branch initiatives within reach of every school becomes more pressing. Indeed, in some areas, where the local advisor responsible for geography is not a geographer at all and carries many other responsibilities, it is the existence or otherwise of a GA branch which will determine whether or not new initiatives in geographical education are taken and sustained.

We should, I think, take some comfort from the fact that in a time of severe cutbacks in teacher numbers, the membership of the GA has risen in both of the last two years. The production and sales of its publications have more than doubled. Even greater effort will be needed in the coming years to sustain that and also to make increasing provision to train, help and service the increasing numbers of non-specialist geographers who may be called upon to teach the subject as part of their other duties in schools which are desperately trying to spread and re-deploy resources.

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The role of the voluntary professional body is quite crucial. We all need to recall that the GA is not a 'them' tucked away in a lofty eyrie in Sheffield, but an 'us' – a six-and-a-half-thousand-strong 'us'. The health and the survival of the Association depends directly on our own willingness to lift our sights beyond the immediate and parochial, to become involved in committees and working groups, to support local branch activity, and to participate in turning the purposes of the Association towards positive and practical ends.

One has a worrying vision of well-meaning, enthusiastic individualists, getting sucked down by the tide in the next decade, 'not waving but drowning'; others may lack the commitment or the energy to save that which they inherited on appointment. But I am not convinced that we need to take a fatalistic attitude towards events; let us shape the future before it shapes us.

Teaching a geography of the future

The question still remains, however, what kind of geography is worth teaching in the future? What sort of geography will best serve the purposes of the schools in 1985 and beyond, presuming that a community of scholars and teachers is left to teach it?

The dominant theme of this conference is an exploration of the futures of branches of the subject and of elements of it, and others more expert than me are addressing themselves to specific and substantive topics within this general frame. I want to make just one general plea – it is that we should teach in schools and colleges, to some extent, a geography of the future.

When geography came into the curriculum of schools, in the years following the introduction of national education by the Forster Act of 1870, it was set within the context of an imperial heritage. Britain had an empire across the seas, covering a sizeable part of the world, and it was natural that those who would lead it, serve in it, fight for it and visit it, should know about it. Our whole history as an exploring and mercantile nation prepared us for a global perspective in national education; the Empire added a practical utility to the reasons for which it should be taught.

Times change, and the supplementary rationale for geography (that which derives from circumstance rather than philosophy) must change with it. Since we no longer have an empire, does it diminish the practical need to know about the world around us? Or are there not new challenges? The challenge to steward the environment so that it remains intact for future generations is one such spur, and is itself a mainspring of the World Conservation Strategy already considered in this conference. Another challenge is the need to establish rational and harmonious relationships in the abrasive context of the global village; this is also important now that Britain itself is a more obviously multi-racial society – a question to which the GA addressed itself directly in the last year.[8]

I suggest that geographers need to add one general perspective to their work if there is to be a purpose and practicality about the geography of the 1990s. It is the teaching of possible geographies of the future. There, Robert Robinson for one, would be sure to find the excitement of intellectual speculation amongst 'the savannas of fact'.

The first words which I ever managed to get in print in book form, were a quotation from John Grierson, that most gifted of film-makers, whose pre-war documentaries were and still are geographical resources of the highest quality. I still find the words provocative:

> Teaching is, in some senses, a sheltered profession ... It has, in the enjoyment of learning, an especial temptation to dwell in the past, and even to feel at home in it. If the teachers bring the vitalities of the past to give life to the present, all is well; but if their emphasis is such as to make their charges look backwards all is not well. (Grierson, 1966)

As a young college lecturer I examined with a venerable professor who would mark down any work which had the element of what he called 'crystal-gazing' in it. I respect his memory and his work greatly, but I cannot think

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that I share (or ever shared) his view about the undesirability of speculative or predictive work; for the future is deeply embedded in the present, even if its manifestations are at different time-scales. I know that as I look out of my garden window and gloomily contemplate both the length of my uncut grass and the growing rust signs on the bodywork of my car.

It is almost a cliché these days for geographers to speak of the world as highly dynamic, with process in physical, vegetational, agricultural, economic, urban and industrial spheres equally the subject for study. It seems important, therefore, for forecasts of the results of these processes to be generally considered, contemplated and developed. But they should not remain a rather mystical province of organisations like the Club of Rome, or MIT or governments or multi-national companies. We need to make it clear that individuals can contemplate and influence the future.

There are already books and journals which contemplate the future in various ways,[9] prophets like Toffler (1970, 1980) and Herman Kahn, and a growing number of networks and organisations devoted to futures consideration. There are also an increasing number of techniques which potential forecasters can use; the consideration of data and the extrapolation of trends (such as the long-term Kondratieff cycles), the use of simulation modelling, the so-called Delphi techniques. As long ago as 1970, a conference held on 'Geography and the Future' produced a stimulating set of papers from a distinguished group of academics (Abler et al., 1975). Peter Hall's London 2000 was an early example here of the intriguing and stimulating contribution geographers can make (Hall, 1963).

Since we have, as yet, no centralised control, it is possible to experiment and innovate in this area at various levels. But some of the more highly-coloured visions of the future often leave much to be desired in sound scholarship and in their understandings of ecological relationships. On the whole, geographers do not fall into that trap; a much more 'down-to-earth' approach, based on knowledge about the present and an understanding of current data, relationships and trends, would be a more realistic basis for forward speculation. And as we currently teach the geography of the present, the importance of the future impinges more and more on it, as the following example testifies:

i) The traditional divisions of industrial occupation (primary, secondary and tertiary) now have a fourth category – quaternary (those people who earn a living by generating, transmitting, processing and using information). That fourth category is already dominant numerically in many Western societies (Abler et al., 1975, pp. 35–36).
ii) The industrial geography of the UK has long identified the so-called 'coffin-area' between London and Liverpool as the industrial axis of the country. As 'high-tech' replaces heavy industry, we now have to shift our thinking towards a dominant 'sun-belt' stretching from Bristol to Cambridge, rather than the traditional pattern.
iii) We teach of London, New York, Tokyo – the world's major cities. In the Third World, if we count the people living in the favelas, the bustees, and the shanty towns, some urban areas already exceed those which national statistical digests conventially list as the largest. For example, Mexico City will be the most highly populated urban area by the year 2000 if present trends continue.
iv) We use the sea as hunters and nomads and yet still use it as a bottomless pit in which to tip the world's garbage. Survey vessels which monitor the oceans warn us with increasingly regularity that the capacity of the seas is finite and there may soon come a day when the consequences of pollution are irreversible.

These are just a range of the examples in which, if we teach about the present in school and college classrooms, the prospect of the future inescapably confronts us. Particular issues which fight for time and space on the curriculum – environmental education, education for peace, development education – might themselves be more constructively and less contentiously considered within this geographical context.

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Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four has been much quoted this year; perhaps we should search for its successor in the speculative literature for the years ahead. David Edgar's bleak view of Britain in 1997 might usefully provide us with a provocative stimulus ...

... the Independent Control Console seemed to be stuck on channel change and so Harold went through several snooker channels and some cricket and the racing live from Munich, and sixteen quiz games and Mirrorscreen and Sunscope (both announcing details of a competition) and Expresserama and The Daily Mailout (which were broadcasting the winning numbers of a lottery ...)
'Huh – communications!' Harold thought; the age of information, the age of universal contact, the world a pulsating electronic spider's web with Tokyo as near as Tottenham. Yet somehow, he felt himself, that his horizons had grown narrower and narrower ...
... all the young and ambitious had long since moved down south (to populate the shanty towns on Hampstead Heath and Clapham Common) ... and there was this kind of ghost economy remaining in the northern counties to sustain the ageing population as their once great cities crumbled quietly around them ... as the Great Aunt had so often pointed out cities like Liverpool and Bradford – far from the European ports, their infrastructure in decay, surrounded by bleak countryside – were unviable in the contemporary world, and there came a point where natural sentiment must give way to the harsh realities of modern times ... (Edgar, 1984).

It seems to me that extracts of this kind are teaching resources which can provide both stimulus and objective for study. They are not absolute predictions but it is possible to extrapolate from present-day events towards them and to establish what must or must not be done if the visions are not to become reality.

The sustained study of a number of possible geographies of the short-term and middle-term future will encourage the student to consider those aspects of the future which are desirable and those which are not. Hopefully such geography teaching can vitalise school students into an interest in their own futures, and may help to assuage the premature fatalism which afflicts large sections of teenage life in the 1980s.

In urging that we teach a geography of the future, I do not mean to say that we should give up teaching the geography of the past: but we should make that past the servant of the future. If the future is unavoidable, let us at least not walk backwards into it.

Geography has experienced evolution since its earliest days, and in view of the changes in the world about which it teaches, that is hardly surprising. But in an age in which the future survival of the planet is being called into question by both physical and human agency, we must surely respond to that ultimate challenge.

Conclusion

Thom Gunn, the English poet domiciled in California, wrote a poem called 'On the Move' (Gunn, 1957). It is about travelling on the West Coast:

At worst one is in motion, and at best
Reaching no absolute, in which to rest
One is nearer by not keeping still.

I have tried to suggest in this address that geography has an essence to cherish, but I doubt if it has an 'absolute, in which to rest'. It needs to be 'in motion' in order to navigate the immediate challenges of the present. But beyond that, geography needs to develop perspectives on the future as well as in the past and present – to look onwards to new and distant horizons. Even on the tightrope, 'One is nearer by not keeping still'.

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Notes

1. The interest in the geography of sporting locations is likely to be further developed in the forthcoming Journal of Sports Geography.
2. Comparisons are taken from tables in Statistics of Education 1961–1978, London: HMSO, and from DES Statistical Bulletin 10, 1982 on English School Leavers 1980–81.
3. As Sheila Nuttall (1984b) stresses in a paper in the 'Geo Notes' section of this issue of Geography.
4. The Secretary of State for Education and Science, speaking on ITV's 'Weekend World', February 1984.
5. The Secretary of State for Education and Science, in an article in The Times, 9 January 1984.
6. See Geography and Pre-Employment Courses in the Sixth-Form and The Geographical Component of 17+ Pre-employment Courses (Schools Council 16–19 Project, 1983).
7. The work of the Working Party which preceded the Project is shortly to be published (Corney, 1984).
8. Publications emanating from the GA's Working Party on 'Geographical Education for a Multi-Cultural Society' are expected in the autumn of 1984.
9. See for example Futures, the journal of forecasting and planning, published bi-monthly by Butterworths in co-operation with the Institute of the Future USA.

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Rex Walford delivered this Presidential Address on 17 April 1984 during the GA Annual Conference.