

COMMENTARY

Fruitful Liaison or Folie à Deux? The AAG and the AGS*

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A century ago, the American Geographical Society (AGS), then a half-century old, helped give birth to the Association of American Geographers (AAG), succored the fledgling association, and long rendered it invaluable support. By the mid-twentieth century, the shoe was on the other foot: a mature and much larger AAG was being urged to lend help to the AGS. This article details their intertwined histories and personnel and reflects on their differing takes on geography as a specialized academic discipline and as a comprehensive amateur enterprise. **Key Words:** American Geographical Society (AGS), Association of American Geographers (AAG), disciplines, professionalism.

The Association of American Geographers (AAG) and the American Geographical Society (AGS) long cohabited, but more as parent and child than as partners. One hundred years ago, in Philadelphia, the AGS helped give birth to the AAG, with William Morris Davis as midwife. At an AAAS meeting a year earlier, Davis had lamented “the absence of a society of mature geographical experts” as the chief impediment to the progress of American geography.¹ That impediment vanished with the advent of the AAG.² Celebrating its tenth anniversary, in New York in April 1914, president Charles R. Dryer welcomed AAG “sons foregather[ed] from afar at the house of the great mother,” the AGS.³

The AGS continued to nurture the AAG. Joint annual meetings were hosted and paid for by the AGS from 1914–1916 to 1920–1922 and in 1929; AGS staff served as major players in the AAG; the AGS provided numerous benefactions. Closer union between the two followed council decisions in 1913, with a joint fund set up for expeditions and other research. The first American effort to classify geographers’ manifold realms of interest was carried out by AGS director John Kirtland Wright with AAG collaboration.⁴

Managerial and honorific roles likewise linked the two institutions. AGS directors Isa-

iah Bowman and John Kirtland Wright served as AAG presidents in 1931 and 1946, respectively, *Geographical Review* (GR) editor W. L. G. Joerg in 1937. During this writer’s AGS tenure (1956–1972), GR editor Wilma B. Fairchild and I were AAG councillors and served on its publications committee, which she chaired in 1958, and on its program committee, which I chaired in 1965. AGS director Charles B. Hitchcock served on AAG research grants and honors committees; AGS librarian Nordis Felland chaired the AAG publications exchange committee; William Warntz and Charles C. Morrison aided the AAG in several capacities. Hitchcock received the AAG’s Outstanding Achievement Award in 1959; Fairchild and Lowenthal, AAG Meritorious Contribution awards. Honors became a competitive problem; AGS and AAG medals to and citations for foreign geographers often duplicated each other.

One long-term AGS benefit to the AAG lasted until 1948, when the AAG merged with the larger American Society for Professional Geographers. “The Society [AGS] has continued its cordial relations with the AAG,” noted the 1923 AGS annual report, “and maintains the policy,” begun in 1914 with the AGS *Bulletin*, “of sending the *Geographical Review*, free of charge, to members of the Association,

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placing within reach of every member of the Association the latest and most authoritative comment upon the progress of geographical knowledge throughout the world."⁵ What a pity that largess, with the accompanying boast, are now defunct!

As the AAG attained adulthood under the aegis of Davis's "mature experts," it leaned less on its aging AGS parent and began to lend it support. "The Society gave financial and intellectual encouragement to the infant AAG decades ago, and these close ties have continued," wrote AGS councillors Chauncy Harris, Gordon Wolman, and Warren Nystrom (then AAG Executive Secretary) in October 1967. "The AGS is a major scientific organization in the field of geography," they exhorted AAG members, "and deserves our strong support." Earlier that year, AAG delegates at an AGS "Future Directions" conference were unanimous in urging closer ties between the two. One suggested that the AGS function as the AAG's research wing, another proposed cooperative projects (joint journal reprint volumes, archival collaboration, and later an AAG/AGS Task Force on Environmental Quality). Yet differences augured trouble. One 1967 AAG adviser had "always been scandalized by the way the profession fails to get behind the AGS," while another "doubt[ed] very much that there is a strong role ahead for the AGS if it continues to stand apart from the AAG . . . and has research personnel who operate largely independently of the university research centers."⁶ AGS research staff had routinely secured external funding for their own work, but the lone scholar in geography was already seen as a dying breed.⁷

An earlier difference had arisen when William Morris Davis, following his highly successful 1908 students' tour in France and Italy, failed to get the AAG to sponsor a geographers' tour across the United States. Getting "no favorable" AAG response, Davis turned to the AGS and ultimately won the support of its president, Archer M. Huntington, for the Transcontinental Excursion of 1912, commemorating the AGS's sixtieth anniversary. This venture was as consequential in its aftermath as in the actual event, attended over eight weeks by some forty European geographers.⁸ So firm were the foreign friendships thereby forged that the peace-loving Davis was gratified by their speedy resumption when the First World War

ended. Perhaps more than any other, the international community of geographers maintained a high level of amity and amicable intercourse.⁹

At the AGS/AAG twenty-fifth anniversary meeting of 1929, A. P. Brigham paid tribute to Davis's breadth of interests, his impatience with disciplinary boundaries, and his insistence on individual mastery. "Find it out for yourself," Davis was wont to tell students, "and find it all out." Davis was wholly "unconcerned about the interfering or overlapping of any or all of the sciences" and did not bother to be "worried about the center or the circumference of geography."¹⁰

Neither, for that matter, did the coiner of that phrase, N. M. Fenneman, whose 1918 AAG presidential address was, significantly, the only one ever published in both the *GR* and the *Annals* (1919a, b). Fenneman took geography to task for being more "concerned with purging its own house rather than spreading its borders, . . . always discussing and debating its own content" out of fear that "other disciplines were encroaching" on its terrain.¹¹ Things were ever thus, precursors soon forgotten. The *GR*'s unnamed chronicler of the AGS/AAG 1921 meeting was struck by the continuity of O. E. Baker, H. H. Bennett, and H. N. Whitford's land-use papers with E. W. Hilgard's pioneering soil-erosion studies in pre-Civil War Mississippi. "The 'new' in geography has become almost a fad," he charged. "We are apt to overlook the fact that the recognition of soils and other land problems in the study of man is new only to those who have but 'newly' discovered its importance."¹² A sad oversight in an AAG that (until 1948) limited membership "to persons who have done original work in some branch of geography."¹³

Davisonian geographical traditions, notably interdisciplinarity and the primacy of individual research, resurfaced a generation later at an AGS/AAG conference on "Frontiers in Geography" sponsored by the Office of Naval Research, at Highland Park, Illinois, in October 1959. A minority report by AGS delegates Warntz and Lowenthal departed from the AAG-led emphasis on group research and consensuality: "New frontiers are opened up by the ideas of individuals, not by any consensus," they held. "The history of science is highlighted by innovations that occur only when a single mind perceives in disorder a deep unity." They wel-

comed “the spirit of dissent fostered by [geographers’] divergent aims and points of view.” Along with Jan Broek, Brian Berry, and Fred Lukermann, they elaborated similar views at a “Current Trends in Geographic Thought” joint conference in Lansing, Michigan, in August 1961 and at discussions with AAG councillors and officers on the future mission of the AGS held with the Ford Foundation in 1969.¹⁴

One might have supposed that Davis, Brigham, Fenneman, Broek, Berry, and Lukermann reflected a general AAG view that geographers not fret over consensus, cores, encroachment, and the like. One would be wrong. In the lead essay to *The Professional Geographer’s* centenary navel-gazing issue, the AAG’s executive and research directors (Richardson and Solis 2004, 6, 9–10) pay homage to geography as “an inherently interdisciplinary discipline” and “celebrate and recognize [its] diversity of subject matter and approaches.” But they then urge geographers to “develop more ‘shared experiences’ . . . that engage core concepts” and warn against “excessive balkanization.” Why? Because unless we hunker down and claim our turf, others will take it away from us. “We must consolidate geography’s role as a leader in GIS and . . . new geographic technologies. If we do not do so, . . . other disciplines will . . . to the disadvantage of our discipline.”

It was precisely such defensiveness and fear of alien encroachment that Fenneman and Brigham so memorably lambasted at AAG/AGS forums in 1918 and 1929. Eminent successors have repeatedly echoed their strictures. Carl Sauer famously preferred graduate students who had *not* majored in geography. He detested the discipline’s “painful orthodoxy” and despised its obsession with its identity.¹⁵ As AAG president, Sauer (1941, 2) assailed “the pernicious anemia of the ‘but-is-it-geography’” mind-set. So did Andrew H. Brown; as organizer of the AAG’s fiftieth anniversary program, he “ferently hoped that . . . the question ‘what is geography’ will be entirely absent from a proposed general discussion.”¹⁶ Gilbert F. White (1972, 102) likewise deplored the all-too-common query “But is it geography?” then, as now, pervasive among young geographers in the “highly restricted seller’s market encouraging them to knot together in protected departments.”¹⁷

All in vain. “Perhaps more than any other field of study,” concludes B. L. Turner II (2002, 52), citing essays by Freeman, Golledge, Hart, and Abler spanning the years 1961 to 1987, “geography has invested large amounts of intellectual energy in search of its identity.” In regretting “the failure of the discipline to prosper its image or defend its territory” (Clifford 2002, 434), the AAG’s Richardson and Solis are far from alone, though even some faultfinders confess the futility of the effort. “Nowadays a discipline cannot work by attempting to consolidate its own territory,” concedes Nigel Thrift (2002, 295). “There are just too many other disciplines interested in its domain and they cannot be kept out.” In Thrift’s lament, Nicky Gregson (2003) perceives “another of those disciplinary moments of paralysis, of which geography seems more afflicted than most, . . . desperately trying to convince ourselves of our own self-worth.” Whether the topic is environment (Castree 2004), globalization (Dicken 2004; Jones and Jones 2004), or GIS, geographers feel more cheated than cheered by other disciplines’ creative use of their insights. This “‘bunker mentality,’” as Harman (2003, 419) observes, “is unproductive and self-undermining.” Geography’s turf defenders are hard at work reinventing not the wheel, but the wheel-clamp. They would immobilize the discipline in a Denver boot.

We would do better to embrace the catholicity of two innovative AGS directors, the entrepreneurial Isaiah Bowman and the imaginative John K. Wright. Bowman had small patience with academic colleagues who sought “to defend and promote geography by defining and delimiting it”; for him, as for H. J. Fleure, “Geography is what I like” (Wright 1952, 269). Reflecting on geography’s role in scholarship and education, Bowman (1934a, 29–30) stressed that “a subject occupies its territory not by decree or proclamation; [it] is what its creative scholars really make it, not what the writers of texts define it to be or what they aspire to have it become.” Wright (1952, 269) was happy to lead an AGS “more concerned with ‘finding and claiming geography where it is passing under other names’ than in argument over its metes and bounds.” The dynamic peripheries of geography seemed to him more fruitful than its static core. Taking the widest possible view of the field, Wright’s AAG presidential address in

1946 (1966, 72, 81, 83) urged “the study of geographical knowledge from any or all points of view, [including] the geographical ideas, both true and false, of . . . farmers and fishermen, novelists and painters, Bedouins and Hottentots.” Distressed by the AAG’s drift from scholarly community to business corporation, he warned the Association that “some members . . . regard you as a public-relations outfit or an employment agency.”¹⁸

William Morris Davis’s 1906 encomium (1909, 80) on the multifaceted career of AGS councillor George Perkins Marsh contrasted “the breadth of his interests and the variety of his activities” with the narrow specialization of later scholars. Davis strongly doubted that “advice on the treatment of national scientific problems can be as well given by intensive specialists of the modern school as by men of a wider experience.” Marsh ([1864] 2003, 15) had lauded the “new geography” of Humboldt, Ritter, and Reclus for its “many visible points of contact with the material interests of human life,” for freedom from forbidding nomenclature, and for its “intimate connection with the well-being and social progress” of all peoples.¹⁹ Because geography was still an amateur, and hence a comprehensive, calling, “those whom it may interest can, fortunately, have no pedagogue but themselves.” No more. As geography begat ever more MAs and PhDs, “some of them began honestly to believe that they alone were geographers,” noted Wright (1952, 270). But his AGS continued to “follow the principle that one does not need to have been academically trained in geography, as such, to write what is scientifically sound on many a geographical theme.”

Geography has suffered more than most branches of learning by being ossified as an academic discipline, because the disciplinary straitjacket suits it least. Our eclectic range of subject matter, our mélange of training, our potpourri of subdisciplines allied with other fields belie claims for any integrated realm of concern, short of the world as a whole. Like historians, geographers are generalists whose interests straddle academic fences. This should be seen not as a weakness but a strength, as I have long contended (Lowenthal 1960, 1982). Rather than an identity-hunting discipline, geography should glory in being a bulwark of general public understanding.

Evidence of geography’s bridging genius in the nineteenth century is plentiful. Spurred by global exploration and expanding travel, geographical organizations were founded throughout western Europe after 1815. “Significantly,” remarks Karl Butzer (2002, 77), “most members of such societies were academics from other disciplines for whom ‘geography’ was a vibrant interdisciplinary enterprise that brought them all together.” Alexander von Humboldt’s far-reaching influence on the arts and sciences of nature made him the best-known scholar of his day. George Perkins Marsh’s *Man and Nature* (1864) synthesized natural processes with human history in convincing and compelling fashion; its ecological insights are of enduring consequence for environmental understanding. The writings of Carl Ritter, Friedrich Ratzel, and Élisée Reclus attracted a large readership among the educated public.

Disciplinary professionalization in the twentieth century curtailed the scope of geographical polymaths but by no means quenched their zest for collegial and societal outreach. The influence of Paul Vidal de la Blache and Halford Mackinder far transcended their seminal roles in French and British geography. Clarence Glacken’s *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (1967) remains a magisterial classic in the history of ideas about nature and humanity. Paul Wheatley’s studies command the attention of East Asianists in every realm of scholarship. J. B. Jackson’s insights into the American landscape inspire historians, urbanists, architects, social scientists, and artists, as well as the geographers his journal *Landscape* and his AAG bequest have helped to cultivate wider audiences. The visionary breadth of Yi-Fu Tuan’s *oeuvre* defies disciplinary boundaries, as does that of David Harvey. William Cronon’s landscape histories are familiar across the whole spectrum of academe.

It is worth noting that most of these polymaths are quite marginal to mainstream academic geography; indeed, the affiliations of several lie substantially outside it. Geography is prone to emigration: Robert Kates, Brian Berry, David Harvey capped their careers in other disciplinary homes; at University College London, the Holocene geographer Claudio Vita-Finzi moved to geology, the cultural geographer David Harris to archaeology, and the Africanist Paul Richards to anthropology. I myself have held appointments in history, landscape archi-

ecture, environmental psychology, political science, and heritage studies. There is nothing deplorable about such migration, which flows both ways: the Pulitzer-prizewinner Jared Diamond now doubles in environmental health and geography at UCLA. Wide-ranging enthusiasms, not close commitment to central cores, enabled many geographers—Mackinder, Bowman, Ron Cooke, Ron Johnston, Risa Palm, David Ward, John Weaver, Gilbert White, Alan Wilson—to be matchless university heads.

Geographers should not lament but take a lead in current scholarly trends that are fast eroding professional exclusivity. The internal coherence, boundedness, and self-sufficiency that initially energized academic disciplines now stultify them. The disciplinary structures of the last decades of the nineteenth century were based on classifications of the domains of knowledge that are long outdated. Once a byword for disinterested altruism, “professionalism” has become a synonym for self-aggrandizement. At bottom simply administrative categories, the disciplines were at their best no more than research protocols. They were never valid descriptions of the world (Bender 2003). The physical sciences are more and more integrated. For geography, as Louis Menand (1997, 211, 216) suggests for the humanities and social sciences generally, “the best course may be to curtail the system of credentialism, to end the grip of the professionalist mentality, and to open their doors to the art and ideas, and the people who create them, that have always existed beyond their narrow walls.” In so doing, we may avert sclerosis in the AAG and rejuvenate the AGS. ■

Notes

¹ W. M. Davis, quoted in the *Geographical Review* 19 (1929): 311–14 at 312.

² Expert geographers long remained few, however: the AAG’s initial forty-eight members—fifteen of them Davis’s own students—increased to just 308 in 1948.

³ C. R. Dryer, quoted in Wright (1952, 167).

⁴ The classification appeared as an appendix to the second edition of *Aids to Geographical Research* (Wright and Platt 1947, 269–94).

⁵ *Geographical Review* 14 (1924): 298.

⁶ Quotations in this paragraph are from typescripts in the author’s files.

⁷ The lone scholar has since been euphemistically retitled “individual researcher.”

⁸ The main report is in Wright (1952, 158–66); see also [Joerg] (1915) and James and Martin (1979, 355).

⁹ Other geographers affirm the statement in Bowman’s (1934b, 179) obituary of Davis.

¹⁰ This interchange is cited by A. P. Brigham in the *Geographical Review* 19 (1929): 311–14.

¹¹ The quotations from Fenneman are in Wright (1952, 269).

¹² *Geographical Review* 12 (1922): 486–87.

¹³ James and Martin (1979, 356) note that this qualification kept President Woodrow Wilson out of the AAG, although he was a member of the AGS. Former president Theodore Roosevelt joined the AAG in 1915.

¹⁴ Typescripts in the author’s files.

¹⁵ Sauer’s letters to Gladys Wrigley at the AGS (2 March 1932; Sauer 1932), deploring geographers’ navel gazing, and to Preston James (14 January 1948), opting out of the “jobs-promoting” AAG’s fiftieth anniversary volume *American Geography: Inventory and Prospect*, both in the Sauer Collection at the Bancroft Library, are quoted by Williams (1983, 6–8).

¹⁶ Andrew H. Brown memo, April 1953, quoted in Wright (1954, 10).

¹⁷ Mercifully forgotten by geographers today is the 1959–1960 debate that churned over the very name “geography,” deemed too vague and undignified and insufficiently rigorous by critics who proposed upgrading the discipline to “Regional Science” or “Regional Analysis” (Alexander 1959; Lowenthal 1960; Thompson 1960).

¹⁸ Wright made these comments while chairing an ad hoc committee on the AAG’s history; he did not want the record of the Association “written as a publicity stunt. We draw the line at inspiring history and geography for the benefit of people who have axes to grind” (Lowenthal 1969, 601).

¹⁹ George Perkins Marsh, “Preliminary notice” [to Élisée Reclus’s *La Terre*] (c.1870), quoted in Lowenthal (2000, 401).

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