

The Millennium Project on Australian Geography and Geographers

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Storytelling is more than merely learning something to tell – a folk, fairy, or literary tale; a myth or legend; or a historical or personal anecdote. Storytelling encompasses the bulk of our communications with others. Stories can form the basis of many things we study or experience to enrich and enliven ... (Lynn Rubright 1996, xvii).

I have been collecting and recording people's stories since my honours year. As I have worked, and as I have examined the works of others, I have been reminded of the partiality of knowledge, the paradoxical frailty and power of memory, our desire to represent ourselves and be represented by others in particular ways, and the centrality of geographic concepts and practices in the negotiation of place and of our recollections of place. Storytelling is always placed, and is always political.

At an institutional level, I have also been interested and active in debates about changes to geography and environmental studies, changes that have often meant the amalgamation of these two in numerous Australian universities. Having undertaken my PhD in an interdisciplinary graduate centre for environmental studies, I am particularly conscious that feelings of concern about these amalgamations are not exclusive to my base discipline. But that is a different – if related – story.

In a very specific way, these patterns in my own life serve to explain why it is that, in 1996, I proposed to the IAG Council that there was a pressing need for an intellectual and oral history project on Australian geography and geographers. In part, this need arises from the demographic profile of the discipline's foundational figures, and a perception that their stories and memories – critical to the history of geographic thought in this country – are being lost.

In part, the need stems from a growing trend for geography departments to be merged with other disciplines. It is my conviction that we have a responsibility to the discipline to document what is unique about it, and to record how it has influenced the development of Australia and the Australian peoples.

And in part, the need arises because of the way in which we are coming to understand the power of geography and the influence of geogra-

phers in the creation and recreation of place and nation, in the construction and maintenance of literal and metaphoric borders and territories, in the development and validation of particular forms of knowledge.

In July 1997, the Council endorsed my proposal. At present, there are three objectives to the work. First, it is important to record and document for the discipline - and the community at large - the lives of geographers who have contributed to the field over many years. Second, it is desirable to map the various terrains in which these men and women have worked: to contemplate changes in philosophical approach, political orientation, practical focus, and pedagogic thrust. Third, it is important to account for what has been important to geographers over time, noting whether and how these priorities have changed. Finally, it will be useful to trace the complex influences that geography and its practitioners have had on the wider Australian and international communities. In my view, however, this work must try to capture the folkloric as well as the heroic within the discipline.

Projects of this kind are not novel. The Association of American Geographers has undertaken both audio and audio-visual recordings of members' oral histories. Work on the International Dialogue Project (IDP) by Anne Buttimer and Torsten Hägerstrand is also often seen as pioneering this kind of work. Furthermore, interviews with various Australian geographers have already been undertaken: Patrick Armstrong, Les Heathcote, and Peter Scott (as part of the IDP), Ann Marshall, Oskar Spate, and Graham Lawton among them. Nevertheless, there are distinctly vernacular elements to our situation and our history. An approach which allows the folkloric, the local, the less visible or seemingly less valued elements of the discipline be heard and documented is also called for. It is a method perhaps more in keeping with the work of Janice Monk, who has been collecting stories about women geographers in the United States, particularly from among the ranks of non-academics.

The International Dialogue Project

There are several useful things to be gained from examining the IDP. In *Geography and the Human Spirit* (1993), Anne Buttimer brings together some of the thematic and theoretical fruits of a decade-long project which Torsten Hägerstrand and she administered from 1978 to 1988. She notes how geography, because of its traditional and eclectic position in both the sciences and humanities, was an ideal focus for a project designed to bring together in conversation scholars from disparate disciplines. Despite the chauvinism which derives from that schism, dur-

ing the emergence of the IDP integration once again became appealing to geographers. Buttimer's vision was for a collectively 'owned' – for an integrated – project, and it is a vision that already characterises the Millennium Project, as will emerge in a moment.

The core of the IDP consists of 'video-taped interviews with senior and retired professionals in various fields where stories were told of career experiences, the dream and reality of major projects, and the circumstances in which ideas were inspired, developed and tested' (1993, 4-5). Tapes then served as a stimulus for discussion and debate among other specialists in diverse fields 'who otherwise had little occasion for dialogue' (1993, 5).

In all, over the course of the decade, 150 interviews were conducted with specialists in geography, planning and development, health care, creativity, enterprise, intercultural communication, philosophy and science. A number of these stories form the focus of *The Practice of Geography* (Buttimer 1983) and many are reported in *Life Experience as Catalyst for Cross-Disciplinary Communication* (Buttimer 1986).

In her 1993 analysis of the IDP, Buttimer categorises her findings according to three themes. First is meaning – the vocational skills, talents, and work preferences of those interviewed. Second is metaphor – the cognitive style or basic world-view underpinning the research models and paradigms produced, used and circulated by these individuals. Third is milieu – those issues of public interest that geographers have sought to elucidate and to influence through disciplinary thought and practice.

These three themes correspond in several ways to the Millennium proposal to monitor and map changes in Australian geography's philosophy, politics, practice and pedagogy through oral history, autobiography and group conversation. As Buttimer notes 'These ... intertwining themes enable one to appreciate the uniqueness of each individual's career journey, and simultaneously to discover general processes involved in the relationships between scholarly practice and its societal context' (1993, 5). Of course, Buttimer's conceptualisations are not the only ones that can be brought to bear, and it will, I think, be one of the most intriguing elements of the Millennium Project to see how its contributors frame their analyses.

Mapping Change

In terms of mapping change in the discipline, it is clear that during the last twenty years, the intellectual tussle over the validity of the concept of scientific revolutions, and the debates over the production of knowledge

sparked by various scholars both within and outside geography, have clearly influenced the discipline.

Whether one explains such changes as 'paradigm shifts' or as an ongoing argument 'between Gnostics and Socratics ... between images of reality as being in perpetual flux versus images of self-aware human subjects seeking rational understanding of the world' (Buttimer 1993, 71), change there has been. Mapping its terrains is important work for this discipline. But, again, in my opinion such cartographies should not exclude reference to wider, more generic shifts in the political economy, in social and cultural narratives, and in the practice of science.

Buttimer's own rationale for story-telling is that a malaise in the discipline has prompted a drive toward self-reflection which could yield positive signposts to the future, especially in terms of 'the nature and quality of KNOWLEDGE whose history we wish to reconstruct, the processes whereby such historical research is to be done, and the effectiveness of our results for contemporary thought and practice within geography' (1993, 2; original emphasis). Whether or not one agrees with this line of thinking or its philosophical underpinnings, there are strong motivations to document the past, and certainly one of these motivations is to provide directions to the future, compass bearings into terra incognita.

Methodological Concerns

How, then, to undertake an intellectual and oral history project of a discipline and its adherents? Methods by which to undertake memory work, story-telling, and autobiography have been explored by me in *Australian Geographical Studies* (Stratford 1997), and there is a significant literature in various disciplines on these forms of knowledge production. As Jane Jacobs alludes in the forthcoming *Meridian Series* volume on *Australian Cultural Geographies* (1998/99), a robust working relationship between the theoretical and the empirical is imperative. Beyond this proposition, one could also point to a need to restyle and reconfigure the ways in which we produce and circulate knowledge. The use of story-telling is part of that agenda. However, such story telling need not be confined to one-on-one discussions, but could also take in group conversations among members of study groups at future IAG conferences or specialist meetings.

In relation to questions of 'how to?', Buttimer's evaluation of the IDP *Life Experience as Catalyst ...* (1986) is illuminating. She notes the following:

- (i) A substantial collection of documents is rapidly generated by this kind of work, and 'this constitutes a unique body of research material' (p.87) for both teaching and research.
- (ii) Budgeting must be realistic, and should account for the administrative, technical, and developmental needs of the project.
- (iii) Interest in the project was a function of level of people's participation in it.
- (iv) The process of any dialogue project is enormously demanding on people and institutions, and clear ways must be thought of to ensure that resources are adequate and ongoing.
- (v) Story-telling is the most successful for eliciting information, although choice of media (audio/video/writing) is important. As Buttimer observed in relation to people who were reluctant to be filmed or recorded: 'It would seem feasible, therefore, to arrange for the printing of essays and reflections, many of which remain unpublished' (p.89).
- (vi) In situations involving more than interviewer and one respondent, and in situations crossing disciplinary boundaries, recounting the tasks of certain problem solving exercises was the most effective means to elicit lively conversation among people not usually engaged in conversations of these types.
- (vii) Video-taping adds complexity to the work by an order of magnitude, this medium needs trained and experience personnel; the involvement of professional editors is crucial.
- (viii) Continuity is essential: 'Given the long-term needs for continuity and cumulative expertise which the dialogue project envisions, it seems that a solid institutional anchoring is required' (p.96).
- (ix) There is a need for a base of contact outside the academy, and for networking [hence the added emphasis in the Millennium Project on eventually involving members of government, of Geography Teachers' Associations, and of the Royal Geographical Societies].

From the foregoing, it is clear that eclectic patterns of investigation and appropriate levels of funding were important.

So where are we at after several months? Notices about the project have been circulated on the IAG's listserver, and in the IAG newsletter. Stemming from these exercises, close to 30 nominations have been received from geographers in Australia and from overseas, suggesting whom from among the members of our discipline might be most appropriate to interview in a first phase of biographical and oral history work. I have been undertaking preliminary literature searches on various matters, including what has been published by and about some of these individuals, though much remains to be done there. As well as interviewing these individuals, it will be desirable to seek permission to examine respondents' primary documents – such as laboratory and field reports, professional and relevant correspondence, and academic curricula designed by them, among others.

At present seventeen interviews are in the pipeline:

RESPONDENT	INTERVIEWER	STATUS
Harold Brookfield	Barbara Rugendyke	in process
John Connell	Barbara Rugendyke	in process
Bill Cooper	Roy Jones	in process
Jack Davies	Bruce Thom	in process
Margaret Feilman	Jean Hillier	in process

Ruth Fincher	Kate Myers	interviewed
Jim Fox	Jim Walmsley	in process
Joe Gentilli	Eleanor Bruce	interviewed
Reg Gollege	Ray Sumner	in process
Les Heathcote	Cecile Cutler	in process
Trevor Langford	Smith Bruce Thom	in process
David Lea	Barbara Rugendyke	in process
Jack Mabbutt	Bruce Thom	in process
Murray McCaskill	Cecile Cutler	in process
Janice Monk	Ruth Liepins	interviewed
Peter Scott	Les Wood	in process
Jim Walmsley	Neil Argent	in process
Murray Wilson	Lesley Head	in process
Bob Young	Lesley Head	in process

Other names have also been forwarded to me: Janice Corbett, Bruce Thom, Patrick Armstrong, Eugene Fitzpatrick, John Holmes, Diana Howlett, Ian McPhail, Mal Logan, Joe Powell, Peter Rimmer, David Smith, and Gerry Ward. Interviews are currently being arranged for some of these, and work will commence on others shortly. Fay Gale has recently been interviewed in another context by Kay Anderson, who has kindly agreed to provide copies of the transcripts for our the archives.

Word has also been received from David Outhet, a senior administrator in the New South Wales government – and a geography graduate. He would be pleased to be involved in organising workshops with geographers in government. This kind of work, alongside that tapping into the wealth of stories from people in Royal Geographical Societies, could be a valuable part of the broader idea of the discipline's history. However, I think it warrants more thought, and certainly would require additional resources.

From discussions with Council, it is also clear that there is need for a second phase of the Project, documenting changes to sub-disciplines of geography (a task which has important differences from biographical work). Jane Jacobs, for example, has suggested that there be an examination of our complex relations with Asia, in various sub-disciplines. There may also be considerable scope for audio- and video-taped group discussions on several matters that pertain to the history (and indeed the future) of the discipline, and to its important linkages to other parts of Australian society.

Proposed Procedures and Outcomes

A loosely standardised approach to the collection of interviews and

related materials has been developed by me, in conjunction with Council, and in particular after consultation with Roger McLean and two Council representatives, Iain Hay and Jane Jacobs. This approach is documented in the Guidelines for Interviewers. There are nine core questions to the Project, although this certainly does not proscribe the conversation ranging much more widely. The steps for approaching respondents are designed to fit NH&MRC guidelines for ethical research, and respondents will be asked to sign copyright over to the Project – either conditionally or unconditionally. The Guidelines for Interviewers and related papers are attached at the end of this document.

Protecting and maintaining interview tapes has been given some thought. While living in Canberra in 1996, I held discussions with staff at the National Library of Australia about how to preserve audio-tapes, establishing that this procedure is both difficult and costly. Many organisations whose members are eliciting histories from each other are often resigned to accepting the deterioration of tapes, relying on written and electronic copies transcripts. In terms of the subtleties of oral communication, this is not ideal. There is also the issue of how and where to establish the Project's archives, and whether to lodge copies of all tapes and documents with an organisation such as the National Library. I would welcome input from members of the IAG on these matters.

There are many ways in which this work can emerge into the public forum. I am sure that there are innovative ways to produce electronic and other teaching tools around the presentation and interpretation of interviews and related documents. There may well be opportunities to produce one or more volumes on Australian geography and geographers through the Meridian Series. And, of course, the development of scholarly and popular commentaries in the print media is predicted. Again, I would welcome other ideas and input from members of the IAG on how best to disseminate the findings from this work.

Funding

I am most grateful to the IAG Council for providing seeding money to start this Project. The Head of School of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Tasmania has also generously ensured that the School has absorbed numerous printing, telephone and fax costs, but this arrangement cannot be a long term one. In other words, ongoing funding will be needed to maintain the viability of this work.

As Buttimer noted, under-estimating the financial resources needed for a venture such as this can be disastrous. In discussions with staff of the Research Office of the University of Tasmania and various colleagues

about funding for the project, a typical reaction has been "Why isn't the discipline supporting this work?" If each of the twenty or so departments were to contribute a modest annual sum to the Millennium Project, there would be sufficient support to ensure its ongoing security, and this would more readily guarantee quality outcomes for the research. The promised and anticipated involvement of many people will also foster collegiality, and individuals (and thus departments) will have the added benefit of being involved in an active publishing program, most likely from 1999. Finding appropriate sources of external funds is also a possibility.

Conclusion

I mentioned at the beginning of this paper that there are presently three objectives to the work of the Millennium Project. I think it worth reiterating these.

First, it is important to trace the lives of geographers who have contributed to the field over many years.

Second, it is desirable to map the terrains in which these men and women have worked: to consider changes in the discipline's philosophical approach, political orientation, practical focus, and pedagogic thrust.

Third, it would be intriguing to account for what has been important to geographers over time, noting whether and how these priorities have changed.

Fourth, it will be productive to track the complex influences that geography and its practitioners have had outside the discipline and in non-academic fora. This work should embrace the folkloric as well as the heroic.

In closing, it remains for me to repeat that this exploration will only work as a collective one, and that there are many paths, many perspectives, and many outcomes that form that act of exploration.

References

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- This was the plenary address for the IAG conference in Fremantle in July 1998.