



## **Re-reading *Geography as a Pivotal Subject in Education* by H. Mackinder**

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Reading this speech by the well-known geographer Halford John Mackinder (15 February 1861 – 6 March 1947) can be at the same time reassuring and troubling. Even though it was presented nearly one century ago, some of its words sound incredibly familiar in the current debate about the role of geography in school curricula, and generally in education.

In this passionate speech Mackinder tells several stories. The story of the discipline in the school and university systems of the United Kingdom between the end the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; his personal story as a teacher of geography and champion of the subject; and the story of a subject that has constantly to reaffirm its position, suspended between sciences and humanities.

Mackinder, widely known for his geopolitical theories (and especially for the so-called “Heartland theory”) was a major figure in the development of geography in the United Kingdom. Among his many achievements, we can mention the fact that he was one of the founders of the Geographical Association (established in 1895), whose main aim was to promote the role of geography in schools. He was Chairman of the Council of the Association from 1916. In 1895 he was among the founders of the London School of Economics, where he

served as Director from 1903 to 1908<sup>1</sup>. Some further information about the early stages of his career can be found in the very speech we reproduce here below (narrated at times with a perfectly British sense of humour).

What is striking in Mackinder’s voice is his autobiographical involvement, a clear mirror of his profound passion for the theses he is discussing and illustrating.

Many are the possible suggestions that we, as geographers, can take from Mackinder’s experience as spokesman for the teaching of geography.

First of all, I think it is interesting to note that under Mackinder’s presidency the Geographical Society looked for inspiration in the experiences of other countries. The comparative approach (Mackinder speaks explicitly about the admiration for the German experiences in the field of teaching geography, for instance), seems to be a desirable direction, still in our times. Exchanging experiences among different geographical associations in Europe, and learning from them, was useful at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and still appears as a fruitful perspective to be adopted and continued. The European associations of geography, such as EUGEO and EURO GEO, can be useful containers for this kind of experiences.

Moreover, Mackinder reassures us in considering interdisciplinarity as a fundamental dimension for the teaching of geography. When he narrates about his intense work of promoting

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<sup>1</sup> L.M. Cantor, “The Royal Geographical Society and the Projected London Institute of Geography 1892-1899”, *Geographical Journal*, 128, 1, 1962, pp. 30-35.

geographical teaching around the country, he openly states that to understand geography one has to know properly both history and natural sciences. If the reference to natural history can appear as a clear tribute to the inclination towards physical geography that characterized the discipline at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the reference to history is the result of a clear view of the discipline as a potential bridge between humanities and sciences.

A third point that Mackinder analyses, and which seems to be of primary relevance still today, is the link between the teaching of geography in schools and the teaching of geography at university level. A real success for the social perception of the discipline can come only from a fruitful integration of the two levels. In Mackinder's opinion the key to a successful consideration of geographical studies in academia derives from the central role that the secondary school curricula play in shaping the common reputation of the subject (and the recent reforms affecting high school curricula in many European countries, such as Italy for instance, add a current urgency to this perspective).

Naturally, some statements and perspectives inevitably show their age, and we cannot but recognize assumptions from time to time that we could not fully undersign nowadays (such as the equivalence between the geographical approach and the regional scale). Nevertheless, the essay by Mackinder is a fresh breath of air from the past, which reassures us about the fact that certain "battles" in defense of the discipline have always been part of the geographers' tasks. And at the same time, we are relieved to see that the passion for the discipline is the most important ingredient in order to continue its defense in school and university curricula.

We cannot but agree with some brilliant statements made by the British geographer nearly one century ago, which are still valid today, such as the following one: "Geography is essentially a mode of thought which has its scientific, artistic, and philosophical aspects".

## Geography as a Pivotal Subject in Education<sup>2</sup>

### Halford Mackinder

I have come here today as Chairman of the Council of the Geographical Association, the dutiful daughter of this great Society, to ask for your maternal help at a critical juncture in the movement for the wider and better teaching of Geography. The Geographical Association has some 4000 members, nearly all of whom are teachers of Geography. I speak therefore not only from a personal experience of more than thirty years, but also as the representative of an organized branch of the teaching profession.

The main point to which I am going to direct your attention is that, whereas there is now a full recognition of Geography by Educational Authorities as regards both pupils under 14 and students over 18, yet Geographical teaching in the four adolescent years between 14 and 18 is starved both in respect of time and of money. In order that you may appreciate the position, it is necessary that I should trace very shortly the progress of the movement for the better teaching of Geography from its small beginning to a widespread promise. Then I will state the view of the Council of the Geographical Association that in the present condition of educational affairs it is in the power of the Board of Education by sympathetic or unsympathetic administration to reap or to blight the harvest of a generation of effort. I will conclude by expressing my view that Geography is now ripe to be a pivotal subject in coherent schemes of secondary education.

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<sup>2</sup> The present text was taken from the issue of *The Geographical Journal* where it first appeared (57, 1921, pp. 376-384). *The Geographical Journal* is published by The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers).

After the name of the Author, the following information was provided in the original text: "Read at a Meeting held in the Map-room of the Society on Friday, 18 March 1921".

The version presented here keeps the original format of the text (for instance in the use of Italics and brackets, and in the words spelling, as in the case of "to-day" and "to-morrow").

If there be an occasional autobiographical note in what I am going to say I hope you will forgive me, for I must refer to some matters *quorum pars fui*. In fact, I shall frankly draw on my reminiscences rather than attempt a detached and formal record. It was for a geographical adventure that I was commissioned by this Society just a generation ago and I am going to tell you an explorer's tale. I have no doubt that the experience of others here present has been parallel. *Ex uno disce omnes*.

As has been the case with other successful careers, our movement made, in the first instance, a false start down what proved to be a blind way. For a number of years in the middle of last century the Royal Geographical Society offered medals annually for competition among the boys of a few of the greater public schools, with the result that two or three boys were each year specially coached by one or two enthusiasts among the masters – notably Mr. Robinson of Dulwich – and nothing more was accomplished. It is interesting, however, to observe that with a sound instinct, as I think, the aim of those days was directed precisely to the later school years. But the entrenchments of the established curricula were impregnable to a frontal attack, and fortunately so, in my opinion, for neither the subject of Geography nor its teachers were then prepared for a principal *rôle* in education.

In the early eighties the Council of this Society began to realize that they were missing their mark, and, under the lead of Mr. Francis Galton and Mr. Douglas Freshfield, they decided to withdraw the offer of the medals and to embark on a better calculated effort. Mr., now Sir John, Keltie was despatched to the continent on a reconnoitring mission, and returned with an eye-opening report and a collection of maps and apparatus gathered from several countries, but principally from the German-speaking lands. The lead of Germany in Atlas cartography and in scientific and philosophical Geography was at that time indisputable and due probably to the military influence in German education. From the days of Humboldt and Karl Ritter there had been professors of Geography in most German universities. In this country, on the other hand, the geologists had captured Physical Geography, and had laid it out as a garden for themselves, while the remnant known as “General

Geography” was a no man's land, encumbered with weeds and dry bones. Before British Geography could come into its own again it was necessary to reannex the garden and to clear and cultivate the waste. The universities were obviously the proper agencies for this endeavour.

Mr. Keltie's Exhibition of continental efficiency in the way of maps and apparatus, advertised in the newspapers, attracted my attention, for I had been caned at school for drawing maps instead of writing Latin prose. I came up to London to see it, and though he did not know his young interrogant I had the honour of asking some questions of Mr. Keltie himself. Having just graduated, I naturally proceeded to draw up a set of lectures for the Oxford University Extension, and I gave them the title of “The New Geography”. After all, one of the best ways of learning a subject is to set to work to teach it! The result was that I was sent for by Mr. Bates, then the veteran secretary of this Society, and was told to write a paper on “The Scope and Methods of Geography”. Though that paper contained nothing which would surprise any of us to-day, it divided the Council of this Society into contending and indeed rather angry parties, and the discussion of it occupied two successive evening meetings - there were no afternoon meetings in those days. In that summer, 1887, the Society agreed with the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge to subsidize University Readerships in Geography, and I was appointed to Oxford - the second Reader in Geography to lecture there, the first having been the famous Elizabethan Hakluyt. At my opening lecture there was an attendance of three, one being a Don, who told me that he knew the Geography of Switzerland because he had just read Baedeker through from cover to cover, and the other two being ladies who brought their knitting, which was not usual at lectures at that time.

Curiously, the first effect of the new start was felt in the elementary schools. Growth is slow to begin in a university, and as my stipend was not very large, I threw myself into Extension Lecturing, and in three years travelled 30,000 miles and taught several thousand pupils, many of them elementary teachers and students in training colleges. We studied chiefly what

Huxley had called Physiography, for the great majority of the students were not grounded either in history or natural science, and were therefore not prepared for Geography proper.

After a year or two, as the result of an alliance with the Faculty of History, my Oxford classroom began to fill with students of Historical Geography, but Physical Geography still met with a chilling reception. Two facts had become clear: first, that the organization of our universities into faculties of natural science and humane letters rendered it very difficult to enlist students for a hybrid study, half physical and half humane; and secondly, that no teaching of Geography really worthy of a university would be practicable until boys came up from school with a better grounding in the necessary rudiments. The policy indicated, therefore, was to concentrate on training a few post-graduate students who should go forth into the schools and prepare pupils to enter the universities with the geographical mode of thinking already established. With this in mind, I seized the chance of a British Association Address in 1895 to plead for the establishment of a University Institute of Geography, in which should be assembled both the physical and the philosophical teaching of the subject. My dream was realized in 1899 in the Oxford School of Geography. The University agreed to grant a Diploma to whole-time students of the school, and I was so fortunate as to obtain the late Dr. Herbertson as my principal assistant – I made an express journey to Edinburgh in order to dissuade him from accepting an American offer which had been made to him, and I took him back with me to Oxford in triumph.

About this time a step had been taken the significance of which was not at first recognized. Mr. Dickinson of Rugby had been using lantern slides in his classroom, and wanted to organize a system of exchanging slides between school and school. The Royal Geographical Society referred him to me, and at my invitation the first meeting of the Geographical Association was held at Christ Church, Oxford. Herbertson soon became Secretary of the Association, which under his auspices flourished, and began to publish a journal, the *Geographical Teacher*.

Meanwhile the subject itself was being reshaped. Suess's 'Das Antlitz der Erde' gave a geographical turn to that department of Geology which is now known as Geomorphology. So revolutionary were his method and outlook that the Royal Society hesitated for years before awarding him a medal. Bartholomew's Meteorological Atlas, edited by Buchan, gave us in modern form the necessary apparatus for a corresponding geographical trend in what I will describe as Geophysiography. Davis in America clothed the accumulating analysis of river systems with a terminology often laughed at but none the less provocative of fruitful and systematic study. The conception of the distribution of plant and animal associations and not merely of species completed the sequence of ideas needed for a regional, that is to say a truly geographical synthesis. I believe that I was the first habitually to use the expression "regional" in this connection, but Herbertson made a further advance with it in his paper on the "Major Natural Regions of the World". If the Philosophical or Humane study of Geography lagged behind for a time that was no more than was to be expected, for that study postulates not only developed Regional Geography on the physical side, but also the application of economic and strategical ideas to the past and present distribution of human societies. Here the work of the French geographers and sociologists has been important, and notably in their different ways that of Vidal de la Blache and of Leplay. Not the least incentive to a scholarly geography in the completest sense has been the need of it as a weapon of research for the reconstruction of the early history of mankind as revealed by excavation. Perhaps without being invidious I may name my friend Prof. J. L. Myres as a pioneer in the application of Geography to this purpose. When we remember that the whole of this great academic superstructure is based on an infinite labour of surveying in the field, and that it is only within the present century that we have so far reduced the unknown areas on the globe that we can begin to generalize with a sense of completeness, we obtain some measure of the advance achieved in the last thirty years.

The results of all this work – organization, teaching, research, and writing – ripened suddenly to a harvest in the ten years before the

war. Professorships and Lectureships in Geography were established in nearly all the universities of the kingdom. Competitors to the Oxford School appeared in several quarters. A place was found for Geography in Pass Degrees, and presently in Honours Degrees. Students began to flock to the classes, and no difficulty was experienced in placing the better of them in posts, usually of course as school teachers. Text-books appeared in increasing number. A few even of the great public schools began to make Geography the specialty of one of their masters.

This was the position when the war came upon us, and then in a rudimentary sort of way the whole people began to think strategically, or in other words geographically. We who were growing old in the cause thought that when the war was over our favourite study would be permanently established in its rightful place. But as with other sanguine war hopes and forecasts the realization, although not contrary to what was expected, has not been complete. True that the classes have never been so crowded with students as at present, and the Geographical Association has never had so many members. Further victories, too, have been won in the curricula for University degrees. During 1920 there were at least ten Summer Schools in Geography in England and Wales, most of them overcrowded with students. But there is none the less a feeling of uncertainty prevalent among teachers of Geography, a feeling that the promise of a rich harvest may after all be disappointed, and a spirit, therefore, of discontent with our Educational Providence.

In plain words, it is felt that the secondary schools are the key to the position, that the curricula of those schools are passing more and more under the control of the Board of Education, that the Board in its Secondary Branch is not very sympathetic with the claims of Geography, and that it is in the power of the Board to stop advance just at the time when as the result of a whole generation of endeavour Geography and geographers have been shaped to the purpose of an efficient educational weapon. Let there be no mistake about it, if the upper classes in secondary schools are not allowed, in cases where it is so desired, to make Geography a main subject of instruction, then the University study of Geography will be impoverished for the

reason that it will be impossible to exact a preliminary knowledge of students entering the classes, and still more for the reason that no adequate scope will be offered for those who graduate in the subject. Once let it be clear that that vicious circle is to be established and it will inevitably follow that the effort to improve the standard of University Geography will be relaxed, and in the long run even the elementary schools will feel the effect.

The issue of regulations discouraging to geographers began before the war. It is quite likely that there was no intention to discourage, but we have to deal with the effect. In 1913 the Board of Education (Secondary Branch) issued a Circular (No. 826), still not withdrawn, in which it was stated that "It is not necessary that separate instruction in both History and Geography should be given in all forms. In schools in which the pressure on the time-table renders it necessary, a shortened course of geography, terminating at the age of 14 or 15, may be accepted". As a matter of fact this recommendation had at first very little effect. The movement to improve Geography teaching continued in spite of it, and more and more schools and pupils studied the subject, while the work done was increasingly valuable.

In 1917 the Board of Education (Secondary Branch) decided to encourage work in schools beyond the age of 16 (matriculation standard) by initiating what are known as "Advanced Courses" for pupils between 16 and 18. With the principle every one interested in education will agree, but unfortunately some details of the scheme as drafted have proved disastrous to Geography. It is the one and only main subject of a liberal school education, which it is impossible to take as a main subject in any of the Board's advanced courses. The consequence is that much official pressure is exercised to prevent pupils from making Geography a principal subject between 16 and 18, and the courses are too full to allow of its being taken at all adequately as an extra.

Two results follow from this. In the first place, schools naturally encourage pupils between 14 and 16 to concentrate upon subjects which will be important for them between 16 and 18, and Geography is suffering from this in

a large number of schools. Time-tables are being readjusted against Geography even in schools with really distinguished teachers of the subject. This is now reinforcing the evil influence of Circular 826 quoted above.

In the second place, both by the regulations and by the early dropping of Geography, it is suggested that the subject is not of an importance comparable with that of other subjects of the curriculum, and that it can consequently be taught by teachers of a lower grade. Discrimination in detail, as regards status and salary, against teachers of geography, however qualified, is becoming widespread and dangerous.

And this is not the worst. As a result of the antagonism to Geography above noticed the subject has great difficulty in claiming any place in the "Second Public Examinations", and those universities which have recognized it here have need to act virtually in opposition to the Board's schemes as drafted by its Secondary Branch. In the case of some universities, there is undoubted feeling at what is considered the grave indifference of the Board to an essential part of the training of citizens. The case is made more serious now that Government scholarships and scholarships given by university authorities and local authorities as well, are to be awarded in ever-increasing proportion on the result of the "Second Public Examination".

The action of the Board is thus producing a situation in which Geography is to be taught up to the age of 14, but as little as possible to pupils from 14 to 18. The universities clearly wish it to be taught to students over 18, and thus have to deplore the reactionary attitude of the Board's Secondary Branch. The great point is to secure some recognition of Geography as a subject in the "Advanced Courses".

The Board did recognize, experimentally, courses including Geography at Leytonstone and at Ruabon. These courses were allowed grants on the basis of "grants for experiments", i.e. £ 250 per annum against £ 400 for advanced courses. I understand that Ruabon School has now set this experiment aside and organized an advanced course with Geography in a subordinate position so as to get the £ 400.

The central idea of these "advanced courses" is the coherency of the subjects chosen, so that they shall form a group of such a nature as to be educationally complete. Every one will agree with this intention. What I wish to submit in conclusion is that if liberally interpreted this very idea should work out in favour of Geography and not against it. Geography is inherently not an elementary but an advanced subject. It postulates both scientific and humane knowledge. No one can appreciate geographical correlations without some mathematical, some physical, some economic, and some historical knowledge. Geography is essentially a mode of thought which has its scientific, artistic, and philosophical aspects. If our aim is to give unity to the outlook of our pupils, and to stop that pigeon-holing of subjects in their minds which has prevailed in the past, then Geography is admirably fitted as a correlating medium. It may very easily be made the pivot on which the other subjects may hang, and hang together.

Let me indicate my meaning by two or three examples. I can conceive of a very fine course for boys between 16 and 18 conducted by three masters working in harmony and teaching three major subjects, such, for instance, as Mathematics, Geography, and Greek, and two minor subjects, say, Physics and Latin. The geographical teacher would be able to assume the mathematical knowledge needed for map projections, the physical knowledge needed for the understanding of the air and water circulations, and the historical knowledge which accompanies the modern teaching in Greek and Latin. He would no doubt choose the Mediterranean for his special subject, and would fascinate his students by linking together all their studies in a concrete philosophy. To take only one other illustration, let us assume a similar combination, but with the following components – as major subjects, Chemistry, Geography, and French, and as minor subjects, Botany and Spanish. This would be a commercial course, and the geographer would be able to postulate the chemical and botanic knowledge which lie at the root of economic geography, and on the other hand such a knowledge of the Romance lands as would enable him to take Western Europe and South America for his special regions of study.

No doubt it will be urged that History better than Geography would form the pivot between the precision of science and mathematics on the one hand and the human faculties of imagination and expression on the other hand. I desire to make this point in that connection. It is obvious that neither of the outlook subjects – History which looks back through time and Geography which looks out into space – can be studied wholly apart from the other. The question before us, however, is whether our educational perspective shall be based on History with some Geography or on Geography with some History. Now if I were asked why those who have received a university education are so frequently excelled in practical life by those whose main schooling has been won in the world, I should say that it is in no small degree owing to the sterilizing tendency of too strong a historical sense in their mental equipment. Far be it from me to depreciate the statesmanship which is based on the sense of the continuity of events in time. But what matters to the vast majority of people, who must consider to-day and to-morrow rather than yesterday, is the outcome of history as expressed in the facts of to-day, and not the process by which that outcome has been effected. Nothing is more noticeable in the present working-class demand for education, as illustrated for instance by the Workers' Educational League, than the call for economic, legal, constitutional, and geographical information. If the educated classes are not to lose their grip and their influence over the half-educated proletariat, they must strive for a sense of "actuality" in the French meaning of that word. In other words, Mahommed must be thought of as embodied in the still greater fact of Islam in the world of to-day and not merely as a romantic figure of the past. So with Buddha, and Augustus, and Charlemagne, and William the Conqueror, and Shakespeare. Now Geography in its full scope not only deals with the physical environment of human societies but also with those societies themselves, for they are geographical facts. This is the principle which I have ventured to describe as "momentum" in Geography. Geographical analysis alone is not enough to explain the greatness of many centres of urban life. You must include "compound interest" on the original geographical "capital". You may analyze the position of London, and show that it was founded on a defensible hill with a water supply in its gravel top and tidal

creeks for boat-harbours, but you have only so explained a big village on the site. The financiers and merchants of the world resort to London to-day, not because of these physical advantages in the little clay plateau beside the Thames bank, but because eight million people dwell here, and there is established among them the market with the greatest "good will" in the world. In other words, however fascinating it may be to investigate the beginnings of London, we must recognize that the little streams, hills, woods, and marshes, which before the houses were built shaped the site of the city, have very little actually to do with the persistence of the London money market and entrepôt trade. It is in short an independent geographical fact that you have beside the Thames in these days a "stratum" of human beings comparable with a stratum of coal or of soil; a "deposit" of human energy, skill, and habit of working together, which it would be impossible to move to a distance without destroying. Thus the results of history are embodied in geographical facts in a manner quite analogous to the determination of the physical geography of a country by its geology. Everything depends upon the point of view. As I said in 1887, in my paper on the "Scope and Methods of Geography", the distribution between Geography and Geology lies in this, that the geologist looks at the present in order that he may interpret the past, whereas the geographer looks at the past in order that he may interpret the present. We shall make an equally clear working distinction if we say that the historian uses Geography in order to interpret the past, whereas the geographer uses History in order to interpret the present. And I believe that the geographer's standpoint is vitally important to-day.

I have only one more thing to say. Do not let it be supposed that we geographers are asking for a "soft option" in the curricula of secondary education. By all means let there be the most stringent requirements in regard both to the qualification of the teachers and in the exaction of mental effort from the pupils. All that we are demanding at the present time is that when these conditions are satisfied the pupils and the schools which select Geography as a principal subject of education shall be under no penalty either financial or in the examinations.