

A LIFE OF LEARNING

Donald W. Meinig

Charles Homer Haskins
Lecture for 1992



American Council of Learned Societies

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by

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Introduction

The Haskins lecturer for 1992 was Donald W. Meinig, the Maxwell Professor of Geography at Syracuse University. Professor Meinig was educated at Georgetown University and the University of Washington. In addition, he has taught at the University of Utah, St. Andrews University in Scotland, and The Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Professor Meinig has also been a Fulbright Research Scholar at the University of Adelaide in Australia (1958) and a visiting professor at St. Andrews University, Scotland (1973) and at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1974). He has been a guest lecturer at more than 60 colleges and universities in the United States, Canada, England, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, Israel, Australia, New Zealand, and China.

He is the author of numerous articles, most of which deal with the historical and cultural geography of the American West, as do three of his books: *The Great Columbia Plain* (1968), an award-winning study of his home region in the Pacific Northwest; *Imperial Texas* (1969), an interpretation of the sources and patterns of Texas culture; and *Southwest, Three Peoples in Geographical Change* (1971). He is currently at work, aided by an NEH fellowship (1987), on an historical interpretation of the full course of American regional and national development as outlined in "The Continuous Shaping of America: A Prospectus for Geographers and Historians," *American Historical Review* 83, 1978. Volume I of this projected four-volume work, *Atlantic America 1492–1800*, was published by Yale University Press in 1986; Volume II, *Continental America 1800–1867*, is in press.

Professor Meinig has also been interested in the study and appreciation of landscape as expressions of history and culture, as displayed in the book *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (1979), which he edited and to which he contributed several

essays, including “Symbolic Landscapes” and “Reading the Landscape: An Appreciation of W.G. Hoskins and J.B. Jackson.” He served as Chief Editorial Consultant to the National Geographic Society for the 17-part series of maps on “The Making of Americans” published at intervals, 1983–88, and Chief Geographic Consultant for the NGS Centennial Project, *Historical Atlas of the United States* (1988).

Professor Meinig represents a field, geography, that is not always considered one of the humanities disciplines. In addition, he is the first geographer to be selected to deliver a Haskins lecture. The lecture itself demonstrates both the deeply humanistic underpinnings of Meinig’s own scholarship and the fundamentally humanistic perspective that informs his discipline. The lecture is replete with characteristic virtues of Meinig’s other writings. It is modest, describing an extraordinary life of learning, and it covers the author’s intellectual autobiography free of pedantry and full of wit.

The lecture is an unusually powerful one because it so intricately and powerfully links Meinig’s personal development with the evolution of his unique scholarly vision. Like Meinig’s life itself, the lecture is animated by a powerful sense of place and the particularity of place. It thus partakes both of the informing discipline of geography and of the writer’s personal experience. The result is, despite Professor Meinig’s disclaimers to the contrary, the distillation of an unusually distinctive and distinguished career in the humanities and evidence of both the daily pleasures and larger satisfactions of a life of learning. The American Council of Learned Societies was honored that Professor Meinig accepted our invitation to deliver the Haskins lecture, and we are equally delighted to be able to publish it.

Had the idea of such an invitation ever crossed my mind, I would have thought the chances of being asked to give the Haskins Lecture as a good deal less likely than being struck by lightning. I found it a stunning experience, and I cannot be sure that I have recovered sufficiently to deliver a coherent response.

I can only assume that I was selected because I am one of a rare species in the United States—an historical humanistic geographer—and someone must have suggested it might be of interest to have a look at such a creature, see how he might describe himself and hear how he got into such an obscure profession. Geographers are an endangered species in America, as, alas, attested by their status on this very campus [the University of Chicago], where one of the oldest and greatest graduate departments, founded 90 years ago, has been reduced to some sort of committee, and the few remaining geographers live out their lives without hope of local reproduction. I shall have more to say about this general situation, for while I have never personally felt endangered, no American geographer can work unaware of the losses

of positions we suffered over many years and of the latent dangers of sudden raids from preying administrators who see us as awkward and vulnerable misfits who can be culled from the expensive herds of academics they try to manage.

I have always been a geographer, but it took me a while to learn that one could make a living at it. My career began when I first looked out upon a wider world from a farmhouse on a hill overlooking a small town on the eastern edge of Washington State. My arrival on this earth at that particular place was the result of the convergence (this is a geographer's explanation of such an event) of two quite common strands of American migration history. My paternal grandparents emigrated from a village in Saxony to Iowa in 1880, following the path of some kin. My grandfather was a cobbler and worked at that a bit, then got a laboring job on a railroad, and before long had purchased a farm. He had three sons (my father being the youngest and the only one born in America) and as they were reaching adulthood he heard that good farm land in Washington State could be had for a third of the price in Iowa, and so in 1903 he moved there and settled his family on a fine 400-acre place. My mother's parents were born in upstate New York and what is now West Virginia, met in Minnesota, where she was born, and about that same year migrated to the same town in eastern Washington, where my grandfather dealt in insurance and real estate. My forebears were not pioneers but moved to places that were developing with some prosperity a generation or two after initial colonization. That prosperity eluded almost all of them and, in time, most of my aunts and uncles and cousins joined in the next common stage in this national pattern and moved on to Seattle, Tacoma, and western Oregon.

The view from that farmstead was one of smooth steeply rolling hills to the south and west and of local buttes and a line of more distant forested mountains in Idaho on the north and east. This was the eastern edge of the Palouse Country, a regionally famous grain-growing area. Physically it is a unique terrain, famous among geomorphologists for its form and texture, and it can be beautiful in the right season, especially just before harvest. To me it was interesting in all seasons. As far back as I can remember I was fascinated by that panorama. I wanted to know the names of all those features, I wondered what lay beyond, I

explored on foot for miles around, climbed all the nearby summits to gain a broader view. Two branch-line railroads ran along the edge of our farm, readily visible from the barnyard. And so I also became fascinated with trains, watching them every day, counting the cars, learning to recognize the different engines, deciphering all those mystical letters, emblems, and names of the railroad companies, poring over timetables and maps obtained from indulgent station agents. From an early age I was collecting road maps as well and avidly reading about places, mostly far away places. Geography was, of course, a favorite school subject; but more than that, it fired my imagination. There was something about maps, and names of places, and the way they were arranged in space; about rivers and railroads and highways and the connections between places that enthralled me—and they still do. Whereas other children might have imaginary playmates and adventures, and write about them, I had imaginary geographies: I made up railroad systems, with names and emblems, engines and schedules, and put them on maps, with mountains and rivers and ports, and all the places named and their relative population sizes shown by symbols.

But what does one do, really, with such interests? I remember announcing at some point in my boyhood enthusiasm that I was going to be a “geographic statistician.” That came after some hours of poring over my big Rand McNally atlas and memorizing the 1930 census population of every city, town, and hamlet in the State of Nevada. But of course there soon arose in my own little mind the deflating question of what possible use would such a person be? If anyone wanted to know such information wouldn’t they simply look it up in an atlas, as I had, instead of hiring me to tell them? So there I was, even at so young an age, a skilled person with a bleak future, a living data bank no one wanted.

However, larger horizons were being created by the hammer of world events and emblazoned in the headlines of the Spokane newspaper, announced in the clipped tones of H. V. Kaltenborn, featured on the cover of *Time* magazine:

- the Italian invasion of Ethiopia
- Japanese attacks on China
- the bewildering chaos of the Spanish Civil War

— Nazi pressures in the Rhineland, Sudetenland, Danzig—World War II.

I tried to follow it all closely in my atlas, and when I graduated from high school a few months after Pearl Harbor, I was ready to go across the mountains to our big university and begin to train for a career in the U.S. Foreign Service. That seemed a logical combination of geography and history, of places and events, with exciting prospects for actually seeing a lot of the world.

When I look back upon my preparation for this undertaking I am rather appalled at how thin it was in all formal respects. Neither of my parents had more than an eighth-grade education. My father read the Spokane newspaper every day, but I can never remember him reading a book. My mother read a good deal, but other than her Bible, we had almost no real literature in the house. Nevertheless, they assumed that my older sister and I would make our way as far as we might want to go and did everything they knew to encourage us. Even though I soon could look back and see that the 1930s were very stringent times, I never felt touched by the Great Depression. We might not have electricity or running water (in that we were somewhat behind the times even locally, chiefly because my father was so fearful of debt), but I always had new books and pencils and tablets and new clothes for school. But I cannot recall in any detail just what I was being taught, what kind of academic groundwork was being laid, what books I was reading. I remember lots of English drill on grammar but only a few excerpts of great literature. As for classes in history, the only one that comes clearly to mind was the joke of the curriculum: while I was in high school the State of Washington suddenly decreed that every student must have a course in Washington history and government. We had no textbook, and to be led through the State of Washington Constitution by the music teacher was far from inspiring.

Such small-town schools were not bad schools. I was given a foundation in basic subjects, but never pressed very hard to excel. I had conscientious teachers, but no really inspiring ones. The most extraordinary person was a talented young drama teacher fresh from Seattle (hired mainly, of course, to teach typing) who generated such interest and discipline that our little school won the state one-act play

contest two years in a row and the town was so thrilled that they raised enough money (something like \$300) to send us across the country by car to the national contest at Indiana University. I had a bit part, and the long journey to the Midwest and back was an important stage in my geographical education. Our teacher characteristically insisted we make the most of it and not only plotted a route by way of such features as the Mormon Tabernacle, Royal Gorge, Mt. Rushmore, and Yellowstone, she took us to Chicago and arranged for us to stay a night at Hull House. Now, 16-year-olds from the country would have much preferred a modern hotel on Lakeshore Drive, and it was hard to grasp just what a “settlement house” was, but a walk through the immigrant ghetto and incredibly congested Maxwell Street market left a powerful new impression of American urban life.

The deficiency of my schooling I was first to feel was the lack of foreign languages. These were not required for college entrance and apparently were taught only when there was enough interest or a teacher available. I know that French and German had been offered, but not, as I recall, to my class, and I later regarded these as a burden in my university work. The broader limitations of such a place only became apparent later and have never been a cause of great regret. Those of us who enjoyed school and all of its activities never thought of ourselves as country bumpkins. We were well aware of a larger world, in part because of our geographical situation. Washington State College and the University of Idaho were less than 20 miles away and those campuses were familiar ground. Although it was common for students to drop out of high school, most graduated, a few each year went on to college, and I never doubted that I would.

When I now think about those formative years I conclude that the weakness of my formal training was in some degree offset—especially in view of my later work—by the experience of how lively small-town life could be. For hundreds—probably thousands—of towns like Palouse, Washington, one has to go back at least to 1941 to find that vitality, for things changed with the war and changed rapidly—drastically—after the war. And it may seem a contradiction, or at least a paradox, that the 1930s—the Great Depression—was a period of great activity in such places, at least in that part of the country, for crops were good even if the prices were low and there

was an influx of people from drought-ridden Montana and Dakota. If almost no one was making much money, a great many were trying hard to scratch out a living. In that town of 1,100 people there were 50 shops and businesses, several doctors, dentists, and lawyers, a weekly newspaper, half a dozen churches, busy farm suppliers, 10 passenger trains a day, a usually packed movie theater, occasional traveling shows, evangelists, and lots of sports. Saturday night in harvest time, when all the stores stayed open, was so packed you had to come early to get a parking place. I am glad to have experienced all that. I think it has given me some real understanding and feel for what a large segment of American life was like in many regions over a considerable span of our history.

I went off to the University of Washington in 1942 because I was just 17, but knew that I would soon be in military service. There was, of course, much talk and plotting among all male students as to how we could get into some branch that might be exciting or at least interesting. Unlike many of my friends, I had no interest in going to sea or flying. That left the Army, and the ominous possibility of being arbitrarily assigned to cooks-and-bakers school or something equally awful. Concluding that the only thing I knew much about was maps, I spied a course in cartography in the winter term offerings and went to the geography department to enroll. It turned out to be an upperdivision course full of Naval ROTC students, but after a conference with the chairman, he agreed to let me take cartography and a prerequisite course simultaneously. And it worked. At the end of that term I enlisted and was assigned to the Corps of Engineers as a topographic draftsman—and as soon as I completed basic training they saw that I could type and I was put in a dull office job and never had a drafting pen in my hand.

I'll not give an account of my illustrious wartime career. I never got out of the USA. The only pertinent thing is that three years in the Army provided a much-needed maturing and did nothing to dampen my interest in the foreign service. The G.I. Bill opened up heady new prospects, and I remember that with unsullied naivete I sat in my boring army office and sent off for bulletins from Harvard, Stanford, and Georgetown to decide which might offer the best training. After careful study I chose Georgetown because it had the most specific curriculum

and because it was in Washington. I had glimpsed some of the attractions of Washington, D.C. while in officer's school at nearby Ft. Belvoir.

Naive as I was about universities, I have never regretted my choice. The School of Foreign Service was certainly an uneven place, but I had a few first-rate professors and my interest and enthusiasm never flagged. As everyone knows who was a part of it, it was a wonderful time to be at any university. Even though classes were packed, staff was short, and we went day and night, the year around, there was a maturity and seriousness about it that was quite unprecedented. One's classmates varied in age from 20 to 40, from all walks of life, and with a great diversity of experiences. I never had a small class, but some of the lecture halls crackled with excitement: as with Carroll Quigley on "Development of Civilizations" and "Shakespeare" with John Waldron. After my first term I returned West to Colorado to be married, and needing extra income I got a part-time job as assistant to a remarkable academic character, Ernst H. Feilchenfeld, a Jewish refugee, doctorate from Berlin, who had taught at Oxford and Harvard before happily settling in, as he put it, "under the benevolent despotism of Jesuit Georgetown" as Professor of International Law and Organization. He ran an Institute of World Polity, more or less out of a file cabinet, and my job was not only to take care of his correspondence with a distinguished board of consultants scattered about the world, but to sit and listen to him talk. He was a garrulous and lonely man, and after two years with him, I was tempted to think that about 50% of my education at Georgetown was from Feilchenfeld and 50% from all the rest.

So it was an immensely stimulating time to be at that unusual school in the capital of the new superpower. Many of us participated in small networks of contacts with the lower levels of various government departments and agencies. But there were dark clouds as well, and they rapidly thickened. Senator Joseph McCarthy—and many little McCarthys—were running amok. Foreign Service officers were being pilloried as traitors, the State Department increasingly demoralized, and the whole prospect of having one's life work bound to and constrained by such a government created a vocational crisis for me—and for many of my classmates. There were other factors, as well. One of the

virtues of the School of Foreign Service was the practical segment in its curriculum: one studied accounting, business law, and consular practice as well as history, government, and literature. Even a glimpse of the actual chores of consular work, the endless forms and regulations, responding to imploring citizens and would-be citizens, began to tarnish the glamor of my adolescent view of overseas service.

But where to turn? I floundered for a few months. I tried to think about what I most enjoyed. Railroads? I got an introduction to some railroad officials in Washington but all they could describe for me was to become a salesman and solicit freight. Geography? Read and learn about the world? But how to make a living out of it? I have no explanation for why I was so stupid not to see what was so obvious; it finally did dawn on me that that is what professors do: read and study and talk at great length about that which most interests them—they have a great deal of freedom to do it in their own way, and they have captive audiences forced to listen to them. Once I had that belated breakthrough I had no doubt about what I wanted to be: an historical geographer. I knew of a book or two by that name, but neither I nor anyone else I talked to knew if there really was such a field. But I had spent many hours, usually fascinating hours, in history classes and had read rather widely and I already knew enough geography that I was always visualizing a map and often thinking how much more effective the teacher or writer might be if the narrations and explanations had been informed with maps.

I had no advice whatever as to where to go to graduate school, but I knew there was a big geography department in Seattle, where I had taken two courses as a freshman and had actually talked to the chairman; and besides that, I think we were a little homesick for the West. It was not a very good department. Shortly after my time there it was revolutionized under a new chairman and mostly new faculty and became one of the most influential centers of a “new” geography in all the Euro-American world, but it was distinctly mediocre in 1948. Within a short while I realized that I should have gone to Berkeley, but practical reasons impelled me to persevere in Seattle. The not-very-taxing geography courses provided a sound foundation, and I read widely and roamed the campus in search of interesting lectures and courses. Among the most memorable was the packed hall—standing

room only—of Giovanni Costigan’s lectures on English history; what I should have sought was a solid seminar in historiography.

However, I happily acknowledge my debt to one professor who took a real interest in me and was helpful then and thereafter. Graham Lawton was an Australian, a Rhodes Scholar who had taught briefly at Berkeley. He sought me out when he learned that I, having seen an announcement on a bulletin board shortly after my arrival, had applied for a Rhodes Scholarship. He did his best to help shape my rather exotic statement of interests (as I recall, I declared a research focus on Northwest Africa—mainly because I hadn’t found much to read on that corner of the world and was curious about it). As was not uncommon in our region, some bright fellow from Reed College won the Rhodes, but I had gained a very supportive advisor.

I had arrived from Georgetown with a headful of Quigley and Toynbee and Mackinder and other sweeping world views, and it took a while for my geography mentors to bring me down to earth, to get my feet firmly on the ground, and eventually on my native ground, in the prosaic little Palouse Country. Graham Lawton guided me into British and American historical geography—not a large literature—and I soon tried my hand at it.

What started as little more than an exercise, a convenient thesis topic, soon developed into a much larger and self-conscious work. I wanted to put my home area into history, to see how it fitted in as part of American development. To do that one had to create a rather different version of history, one that was focused on the land and places rather than on politics and persons. I wanted to find out what the early explorers actually said about all the various localities, just where the earliest farmers and townsmen settled, spread into other districts, and domesticated and developed the whole region with the way of life I had known in boyhood. I avidly reconnoitered the countryside, visited every locality, studied old maps and documents, read hundreds of country newspapers, plotted data from public and private records. I had a lot to learn about my native ground, but I already knew about some important matters. I knew a lot about farming and livestock raising because I had done them. Our farm was small by Palouse standards but nonetheless real—indeed, more real for my purposes

than others, for my father was the last farmer in that area to use horses rather than tractors. He loved those big workhorses as much as he hated all the high-powered machinery that was already essential to successful farming. And so I grew up with them, learning at an early age how to take care of them, harness them, and work in the field with them—and thereby I was in contact with an older—indeed, ancient—world of farming.

I found great satisfaction in that research and I wanted to share it with others. I wanted to write a book that could be read with pleasure and enlightenment by local residents who had some serious interest in their homeland. I overestimated that potential, but a sprinkling of letters over the years assures me that *The Great Columbia Plain* has helped a few.

At the same time, I wanted to write a book that would command attention in professional circles. I wanted to help create a literature that would at once exemplify something of the character and value of the geographical approach to history and the historical approach to regional study. I was convinced that professional geography in America badly needed that kind of literature. Human geography and regional geography were too largely textbook in form, stereotyped descriptions of a set of standard topics with rarely any historical or interpretive dimension at all. Certainly no geography book told me what I most wanted to know about my country. I thought my approach was a valuable way of looking at a region. It answered most of the questions I had at the time, and I hoped it might encourage others to do something similar on other regions—though, in this too, I seem to have overestimated that prospect.

For a while I had in mind more such studies myself, and I did, in fact, write another book (before I completed this first attempt) from an opportunity provided by a Fulbright to Adelaide—where Graham Lawton was now head of the geography department. A surge of settlers into the dry country north of Adelaide had created Australia's premier wheat region. Emerging at the same time, working with the same general technology, and competing for the same Liverpool market, this South Australian episode offered illuminating comparisons with the Pacific Northwest. Regional geographers are often accused of

being too focused on particularities and diversities, but any geographer's global training should provide analogues and generalizations as well.

But I did not proceed with more historical studies of agricultural regions. Two experiences of residence in "foreign lands" brought about a shift of focus, a change in emphasis. One of these was that year in Australia, where another branch of English-speaking pioneers had created a nation on a continental scale. "The most American" of lands beyond our shores was a likeness many Australians were ready to assert and most Americans seemed happy to accept. There were, of course, grounds for such a characterization, but I was struck more by the differences, and they helped me to see my own country in a clearer light. The thing that most impressed me from my reading, research, field studies, and general observation was the difference in the general composition of the population: the homogeneity of the Australians as compared with the kaleidoscopic diversity of the Americans. And one was more alert to the comparison because the Australian population was just beginning to change toward the American type by the unprecedented post-war influx of emigrants from Continental Europe: Germans, Dutch, Poles, Italians, Greeks, Maltese. Their number was not really large but they were clearly injecting a new variety and vitality into Australian life. Australian commentators, novelists, dramatists were giving attention to the many individual, familial, and social challenges of immigration, acculturation, assimilation—themes that were century-old clichés in America, and I returned with a heightened appreciation of the stimulus, the energy, the creativity, and the special problems generated by the marvelous ethnic and religious complexities of American society.

The other so-called "foreign" experience was congruent with that. I began my professorial career at the University of Utah. I knew, of course, that Salt Lake City was the seat and symbol of the Mormons. We all knew of the Tabernacle Choir, and something vaguely about their peculiar history—polygamy, Brigham Young, and the Great Trek to the desert West. But I didn't realize just what we were moving into when my wife and infant daughter and I settled into the Salt Lake Valley. We found ourselves classified in a way we had never thought of: we were "Gentiles." We had unwittingly moved into a dual society wherein everyone was either a Mormon or a Gentile (giving rise, of

course, to the local cliché that “Utah is the only place where a Jew is a Gentile”). This binary character was a subtle but pervasive reality: two peoples, interlocked in much of daily life, not at all visibly distinct to the casual observer, without any overt antagonism between them, each subdivided into complex varieties within—yet ever-conscious of being two distinct peoples. That Mormon-Gentile dichotomy seemed to permeate everything and it gave a special interest, flavor, and edge to life in Utah. One also came to see that the local landscape, rural and urban, was different from adjacent areas. The farm-villages, the ward chapels, tabernacles, and temples, the rigid squares and the scale of those big city blocks, stamped a visible Mormon imprint on the area.

And so one came to realize that the Mormon Church was not just another of the many denominations in the remarkable diversity of American religion, but was the creator and vehicle of a distinctive people, of a highly self-conscious, coherent society that had set out to create a large region for itself in the desert West and had essentially done so, for Gentiles were a minority and generally regarded as “others,” “outsiders,” even at times “intruders.” Nine years in Utah taught me something new about America, heightened my consciousness of such social groups, made me feel that the historical geographer would do well to focus on the kinds of communities that were characteristic of various regions. Despite powerful pressures toward standardization and conformity, the American West was far from even an incipient uniform or united area.

And so with a heightened sense of life and locality I began to examine the West as a set of social regions. I wrote an extensive essay on the creation and dynamic character of the Mormon Culture Region, then a small book on Texas, followed by another on New Mexico and Arizona. Each of these gave considerable attention to ecology and spatial strategies, as in my earlier books, but the main focus was on the various peoples shaping discrete regional societies. In this kind of human geography one was not describing simple regional patterns, fixed in form and place, but continuous geographical change. That is, changes in limits and relationships, in internal character as a result of migrations, diffusions, demographics, in economies, transportation, and other technologies, in regional attitudes and perceptions.

These more interpretive writings were well received outside geography. A number of historians seemed to find in them a fresh perspective on a general topic still dominated (25 years ago) by the Turner frontier thesis. And I must also tell you that they were the means of snaring my favorite student. He is a fictional character in James Michener's vast volume on Texas. I got to him in the middle of it, on page 504, and changed his life. He was already a football hero at the university, but, in Michener's words:

. . . he read a book that was so strikingly different from anything he had ever read before that it expanded his horizons. *Imperial Texas* . . . by D.W. Meinig a cultural geographer from Syracuse University, . . . was so ingenious in its observations and provocative in its generalizations that from the moment Jim put it down, he knew he wanted to be such a geographer . . .

Michener sends him off to Clark University instead of to me, and I lost track of him in the further depths of that book. I've never heard from him, but I take satisfaction in the fact that whatever one may think of Michener's fictions, it is generally agreed that he gets his facts right.

I had in mind to do a large book on these American Wests—I had done considerable work on California and Colorado as well—but then came another sojourn overseas and from it another shift in scale, if not in perspective. In the fall of 1973, I had a very pleasant visiting position at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. I was expected to give one lecture a week, 10 in all, on the United States; the rest of the time I could do as I pleased. In the winter we shifted to Israel, where I repeated that course on America at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. How to treat the United States in 10 lectures made one search for a few major themes and to generalize at a broad scale in time and space. And thinking about such matters in those places, and later on as we settled into a small village in Gloucestershire, forced one to consider things from the beginning: how did Europeans reach out, make connection with, and get all those colonies started in America? Once one began to think seriously in terms of oceanic, intercontinental connections, one was caught up into a vast field of action, and

inevitably American Wests became but small pieces within a large system. One had always known that, of course, and it didn't make the West of any less intrinsic importance than before, but it altered the balance and made seeing the West in the fuller context of nation, North America, and, indeed, an Atlantic system, the principal goal.

And so I slowly got underway with a rather audacious task of writing "a geographical perspective on 500 years of American history."

I suppose my whole writing career could be seen as a geographer's version of the search for the self—of who one is, and how that came to be, and what is the meaning of it all. For the geographer that means close attention to where one is, what that place is like, and what the summation of the localities of life might reveal. Thus this geographer began his search on his native ground, expanded into the next larger encompassing region, and on and on through successively larger contexts in a search for an understanding of his whole country, of what the United States of America is like and how it got to be that way.

The Haskins lecturer is asked to reflect upon "the chance determinations" of a life of learning. I have suggested some, but two others come prominently to mind: going to Salt Lake City rather than to London in 1950; and going to Syracuse rather than to Berkeley in 1959. When I was finishing graduate course work, I needed a job; I had a family to support. I had applied for a Fulbright to London many months earlier, but the process in those early days of the program seemed interminable. I was unable to find out anything about my status, and so in early June I accepted a position at the University of Utah and felt I could not ethically back out when the award came through later that summer. After all my talk about foreign service it was a painful choice, and I have occasionally wondered what might have happened had I gone to Britain on the threshold of my career. The University of Utah proved to be a lively place for a beginner, starved for funds by a niggardly legislature, but home to some excellent faculty, engaged in considerable experimentation under a new dean fresh from the University of Chicago. The teaching load now seems like a killer, but I was young and energetic, involved in many things, including a TV lecture series in 1953.

In 1956 I taught a summer session at Berkeley and the next year Carl Sauer invited me to join his staff. At the time that was generally considered the best possible thing that could happen to a young historical geographer. But there were complications, at his end and mine. It turned out that the position was not as yet firmly authorized as permanent, and by that time I was already committed to go to Australia for a year. Mr. Sauer agreed that I must go there and he would see what could be worked out for the year following. On our return voyage from Australia, a letter awaited me in London from a new chairman, explaining that Sauer had retired and regretting that no position was available. I have always assumed that I was not the new chairman's choice and, of course, I was greatly disappointed at the time. But we had barely settled back in at our mountainside home when the chairman at Syracuse telephoned and invited me to come for an interview. Looking out my window at the sunshine on the snow-capped mountains looming above my backyard I very nearly said "no thanks." I had never thought of going to Syracuse or that part of the country and had no real interest in doing so. But I did have sense enough to realize that it would cost nothing to go and have a look. In fact, it cost a good deal, for I returned in a serious quandary. I didn't really want to leave the West, for a variety of reasons; I had assumed I would spend my career somewhere in the Mountain West or Pacific Coast, but the prospects at Syracuse were so much better professionally and the region so much more attractive than I had realized that, after much agonizing—and a strong nudge from my always-more-sensible wife—we did decide to go. It was a chance determination of major consequence for us. Syracuse University provided a far better working environment, the Geography Department was very good and kept getting better, the university was never rich in funds but it had some riches in talent, and for 30 years its leaders at every level from department chairman to chancellor have given me much help to do whatever I most wanted to do. Equally important, upstate New York was a beautiful region and an excellent location and we quickly settled in contentedly. Our relatives, all Westerners, regard us as living in exile, but those who have visited have had to acknowledge the attractions.

To conclude on "chance determinations," I would add that I was

fortunate to meet at the outset of my career (in one case quite by accident) two of the foremost scholars and teachers of historical geography, Clifford Darby of London and Andrew Clark of Wisconsin, and to receive their cordial welcome and respect as if I were already a worthy member of our small guild. That meant a lot to a beginner.

Geographers work at various scales; it is expected that we can move easily and skillfully up and down the general hierarchy. My own published work has been mainly at some sort of regional scale and my current project retains something of that emphasis, for a central purpose is to assess the United States as, simultaneously, an empire, a nation, a federation, and a varying set of regions. But my life of learning has been strongly influenced by both larger and smaller views of the world.

Geography, like history, provides a strategy for thinking about large and complex topics. Stephen Jones's observation that "the global view is the geographer's intellectual adventure" has always had a ring of truth to me. I began adventuring at that scale through boyhood fascination with a big atlas, learning locations, shapes, and names, and added substance to that framework through reading at progressing levels about places and peoples. It was always a minor thrill to discover some thick book on an area one knew little about—McGovern's *History of Central Asia* comes to mind—and a challenge to try to make historical sense out of some complicated geographic pattern, such as the world map of languages. One was not simply accumulating facts packaged in convenient areal compartments; one was seeking concepts that helped one to make ever greater sense of the complicated natural and cultural patterns of the world. That sort of study has a very respectable lineage, dating from the multi-volume works of Humboldt, Ritter, and Reclus, but never really got a firm hold in America. Modern single-volume versions only belatedly appeared from the writings of the Berkeleyite geographers, Rostlund, Kniffen and Russell, Spencer and Thomas, but these remained marginal, and increasingly antithetical, to the main stream of American geography. Similar comprehensive works in anthropology, such as Linton's *The Tree of Culture*, and in history, such as Ralph Turner's two volumes on *The Great Cultural Traditions*, and the polemical interpretations

of Lewis Mumford (especially *Technics and Civilization*) also nourished my appetite during my early growth. In time I would work out my own ways of presenting the historical geography of the great world cultures to undergraduates. Helping students to make sense out of their world in such a manner has been a very satisfying experience, and I have never understood why such knowledge has been so persistently undervalued in American universities.

Much the most challenging intellectual adventuring was to be found in those heavy ambitious works that asserted deeper meanings, especially Spengler, Toynbee, and F. S. C. Northrup. One didn't swallow them whole, for reading critiques and alternatives was part of the fare. For example, at the same time as I was devouring some of these works I was being led methodically through the dissection and analysis of "culture" and "cultures" in Kroeber's *Anthropology* by the formidable Erna Gunther, a student of Boas. It was not the audacious claims and portentous conclusions of these metahistorical works that were so fascinating, it was their sweeping perspectives and attempts to integrate an immense range of knowledge in order to grasp the wholeness and the vital springs of the great cultures and civilizations.

A few months ago I mentioned to a musicologist friend of mine a book that I had read about but not yet seen. He said, "Well the author tried to synthesize a whole society by looking at its art, but," my friend said, "it didn't work, it can't work; it was grand, but it was a failure." (You may infer that we were talking about Schama's *An Embarrassment of Riches*). I said that I was especially interested in grand failures. I was, in fact, trying to break into the business. I was confident I could be a failure; I dreamed of being a really grand failure.

The ACLS generously refers to the Haskins lecturer as "an eminent humanist." You would do well to regard me as marginal on both counts. Although my kind of geography belongs in the humanities, for much of it seeks to be a form of portraiture, a depiction and interpretation honed into literature, my understanding of humans is not exactly "humanistic" in the most common modern uses of that term. Rather, it is grounded upon the old, rich, and rather severe view of Man and all his Works as expressed in *The Book of Common Prayer*. That book has been a routine part of my life for 40 years. It

provides a larger scheme of things, however mysterious, that helps put one's own work in perspective. I find nothing therein to keep me from accepting whatever real truth science may offer and a lot therein to help me keep a certain detachment from whatever the latest popular-'isms' of the academy may be. More specifically, in relation to my own specialization, it provides a quiet but insistent warning about some of the characteristic tendencies of American society and culture, as expressed in its exaggerated emphasis upon freedom, individualism, democracy, materialism, science, and progress. By providing wisdom and hope rather than cynicism and despair, it helps to mitigate the anger and alarm one often feels about the drift and disorder of one's own country. Furthermore, that book and its associated rituals offer a code of conduct and a rehearsal of the follies and perversities of mankind that can have a salutary bearing upon daily life. To be reminded year after year that "thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return" is a specific against the vanities and posturings so endemic in professorial circles—and it comes with the insistent warning that none of us is immune from such temptations.

Geography has sometimes been represented as a kind of moral philosophy, primarily in the sense that those who have a deep fascination for the earth needs must have a special concern for the care of the earth. An old definition of geography has been coming back into favor: the study of the Earth as the Home of Man—or, as we now say, of Humankind. We have recently become aware that the Earth as Home is in alarming condition, and geographers, like many others, are eager to tackle urgent problems of home repair and of remodeling the way we live. I have no practical skills to put to use on such projects. I can only add my small voice to the few urging the need, as well, for a much longer perspective on such matters, a far better understanding of how we got to where we are. And that sort of historical investigation must surely lead to a sobering meditation on the human situation on this earth. There are mysteries there to haunt the mind. In such matters I can be no more than a faint echo of the wisdom of Carl Sauer, the only really philosophical geographer I have known, who, while working quietly over a long lifetime mostly in remote corners of time and space, spoke and wrote eloquently about these grand themes, calling for geographers to "admit the whole span of man's existence" to our study and to press for "an ethic and aesthetic under which man . . . may

indeed pass on to posterity a good earth.”

For me, meditations on deeper meanings are more likely to be prompted by a walk in the country than by trying to contemplate the globe. It is this other end of the scale, that of landscape and locality, that most enlivens my sense of ethics and aesthetics. “Landscape” has always been an important—and troublesome—word in geography, referring to something more than a view, setting, or scenery. What lies before our eyes must be interpreted by what lies within our heads, and the endless complexities of that have stimulated important work. I have paid particular attention to symbolic landscapes as representations of American values and generally tried to use the landscape as a kind of archive full of clues about cultural character and historical change that one can learn to read with ever greater understanding. At the same time landscape is always more than a set of data; it is itself an integration, a composition, and one tries to develop an ever keener appreciation of that. It is here that geography makes its most obvious connection with aesthetics, with writers and poets and painters and all those who try to capture in some way the personality of a place, or the mystery of place in human feelings. If geography’s old claim to be an art as well as a science is as yet backed by relatively little substance, the logic and the potential are there.

I was rather slow to appreciate these truths, in part at least, because I was never trained to see them and there was then little American literature on the subject. I did have the good fortune to happen upon an obscure new magazine in the 1950s called *Landscape*, published and edited by a J. B. Jackson, from a post office box address in Santa Fe. A few years later I arranged to meet this modest, refreshingly unacademic man who would eventually be regarded—even revered—as the principal founder and inspiration of cultural landscape studies in America. By happy coincidence I also met Peirce Lewis of Penn State on that very same day and he has served as my principal academic mentor in learning to read the landscape. This dimension of my life was steadily enhanced by personally exploring British landscapes with increasing regularity. I found there a wonderfully rich literature, by scholars and specialists of many kinds and by those splendid English creatures, the devoted, gifted amateur. I got acquainted with William G. Hoskins, the foremost historian of English

localities, who by talent, perseverance, and personality reached out with several sets of books and a splendid BBC television series to bring this kind of historical geographic appreciation to a broad public. In the 1970s I devoted much of my time to landscape studies, to a lecture series, seminars, and field trips. I tried to bring together the best of what I had found in Britain and America with the hope of stimulating some fresh work. A few of my students responded quite creatively, but although I itched to do so, I never produced a substantive study myself. The actuarial tables warned that I dare not delay my larger project, and it is one of my few regrets that I have had to give up doing something on Syracuse and Central New York.

Quite by chance I was able to participate in a really vast outreach to the reading public. In the 1980s a former student of mine, John B. Garver, Jr., served as Chief Cartographer at the National Geographic Society, and he invited me to guide the preparation of a set of maps depicting the historical regional development of the United States. Seventeen large sheets, each containing a set of maps, were issued with the magazine over a span of five years. Each distributed to 10,600,000 subscribers around the world, it must have been my most effective teaching even if only a very small percent were ever studied carefully. (When I see these maps in bins at used bookshops for 50 cents a piece I'm always tempted to buy them, they are such bargains.)

I am a peculiar geographer in that I almost never travel with a camera. That is surely a limitation, even a flaw, but I have tried to compensate. I carry the images of thousands of places in my head, all partial and impressionistic, of course, but obtained with a cultivated "eye for country," to use an old saying. Perhaps I got both the eye and the preference from my father, and my resistance to technology makes me as archaic and crippled in my time as he was in his. My colleagues aptly sum me up as the man with the quill pen in an age of word processors.

Travel is, of course, an important part of a geographer's learning. Though I have traveled fairly extensively, I have not deliberately set out to see as much of the world as possible, as some geographers do, but I find it uncomfortable to write about areas I have not seen and over the years I have used every opportunity—meetings, guest lectures,

vacations—to obtain at least a passing acquaintance with every part of the United States and adjacent Canada. What few research grants I have sought have been used in some degree for such reconnaissance, thereby continuing in modest personal form the famous role of the geographer as explorer.

I mention Canada deliberately because it has come to have an important place in my life of learning. As a geographer, I must regard Canada as an essential part of the context of the United States. And I refer not just to its physical presence on our northern border and the many practical interactions between the two countries, but, as well, to the presence of a companion empire, federation, nation, and set of regions that can provide invaluable comparisons with our own. I regard the common indifference and ignorance of Canada by Americans as arrogant and stupid. To learn and ponder the fact that the basic foundation of Canadian nationalism is the desire not to be American ought to be an instructive experience for all thoughtful Americans. This is not the place to expand upon this topic, I only wish to declare that I feel much the richer for having gotten acquainted with a good deal of Canadian territory and literature. I have been especially interested in writings on nationalism and regionalism, technology and social philosophy, and I have found the ideas of George Grant and W. L. Morton particularly instructive and congenial.

Although I have pursued my own interests with relatively little attention to what was exciting many of my colleagues, I nevertheless claim to speak for geography in a quite literal sense: for “ge-o-graphy,” “earth writing,” “earth drawing,” the task of depicting the actual character and qualities of the whole surface of the globe—at various scales, and at various levels of abstraction. Such a field does not fit comfortably into modern academic structures, and has suffered for it. To the not uncommon question “is geography a physical or a social science?” almost all geographers would answer “both.” That in itself can become an annoyance to tidy administrators (as at the University of Utah, where in my day geography was in the College of Mineral Industries as one of the “earth sciences”). My answer to such a question has always been “both, and more.” That is to say, while much of our work is a form of physical or social science, the larger purpose is of a quite different character. I accept the old Kantian concept that geography,

like history and unlike the sciences, is not the study of any particular kind of thing, but a particular way of studying almost anything. Geography is a point of view, a way of looking at things. If one focuses on how all kinds of things exist together spatially, in areas, with a special emphasis on context and coherence, one is working as a geographer. The ultimate purpose is more synthetic than analytic. Of course, no one can master all that exists together in any area. Every geographer must be selective, and we follow the usual divisions and identify ourselves as social geographers, economic geographers, biogeographers or whatever. The great temptation for administrators is to dissolve geography departments and allocate their residual members to these various disciplines. Such taxonomic logic is not only arbitrary and intellectually suspect, it is deeply destructive. It denies the legitimacy of a venerable field and the coherence vital to its nurture. It implicitly declares to the student that there is nothing there worth devoting one's life to.

If my remarks have taken on a polemical tone it is because such matters have been an ever-present part of my life and because my life of learning has always extended far beyond my formal life in the university. I hope I have conveyed to you that geography has been more to me than a professional field. We are odd creatures. Geography is my vocation, in an older, deeper sense of that word: vocation as an inner calling—not what I do for a living, but what I do with my life. The born geographer lives geography every day. It is the way one makes sense out of one's world, near and far, and it is the means of appreciating the immediate world of whatever lies before one's eyes. Every scene, every place—one's daily walk to work as well as one's traverse of unfamiliar ground—can be an inexhaustible source of interest and pleasure—and pain, for there is plenty to deplore in what people have done to their surroundings. It is difficult to convey the intensity and fullness of such a thing. To such a person geography is not simply a profession, it is a never-ending, life-enriching experience.

I have no idea how widespread this aptitude and hunger for geography are. There are relatively few geographers in total, and a considerable number who call themselves such are of a narrower technical kind who would not really understand what I am talking about—indeed, will be

embarrassed by what I have had to say. I have no doubt that there are others who never think of themselves as geographers who are also responding to the vitalizing attractions of such interests. There are some encouraging signs that the crisis of social science and new confrontations with a complex world may cause the value of professional geography to become more recognized in America. One hopes that thereby not only will the number of persons with the requisite skills for productive work be enlarged, but that the prospect of becoming a geographer will become much more widely apparent so that the young natural-born geographers among us can be nurtured to the full wherever and whenever they may appear.

I was one of the lucky ones. Like most American geographers of my time, I only belatedly discovered that there was such a profession, but I did so just in time to make the most of it. It has been such a richly satisfying thing that when I reflect upon my life, in the way that your kind invitation has encouraged me to do, it seems as if from the moment I first looked out in wonder across the hills of Palouse I have lived happily ever after.

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