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The Problem — Symptoms versus Etiology

That ignorance is bliss in North American schools as far as geography is concerned has been so vigorously bruited by the popular print media in recent years, that the existence of the problem scarcely requires any documentation.^{1,2}

In characteristically North American fashion, professional geographers have tended to address the problem by attempting to stir mass consciousness through promotional hype that extolls the merits of their discipline.³ Unfortunately, such a promotional, shotgun approach has not been informed by any in-depth, analytical understanding of why geography-education has taken upon such hard times from its markedly more pre-eminent position of earlier decades.

Indeed much of that decline can be attributed to the naive presumption that the self-evident 'integrative' merits and social utility of the discipline would ensure its survival without any need for ongoing vigilance on the part of its partisans. Such a view, however, is really a variant of the moral fallacy, namely, that what is good, ought to be; and that which ought to be, must exist and continue to exist.

The Backdrop of Contributing Factors

What are the major reasons then why school-geography has fallen into such a sorry state of affairs? Most of the 45 or so contributing (and interacting) factors that the present writer has been able to identify can be grouped under the following generic headings (which are by no means mutually exclusive):

1. Political sociology of academic behaviour/sociology of knowledge factors;
2. Logistical and structural factors;
3. Paradoxical intention, self-deception and apathy on the part of the community of academic geographers; and
4. Other.

Academic Geography as Part of the Problem

As each of these generic headings requires separate papers to explicate the subtexts informing any credible analysis, this initial paper will emphasize the role of academic geographers themselves in the rise and fall of school geography. That role was clearly indispensable in the emergence of school geography; but was not the exclusive *sine qua non* of its fall. Our task is not to assign blame but to

On the Demise of School Geography: A Post-Mortem Report

delineate causal factors on the cogent grounds that it is surely more expeditious to treat causes than symptoms if one wishes to resurrect the spirits, if not the corpse, of school geography.

Political Sociological Factors and the Struggle to Define 'Knowledge'

Generic factors #1 and #2 do merit some passing comment by way of providing some context for the current plight of geography-education. The view that much of academic behaviour is driven by territorial imperatives has already been discussed in a number of works ranging from popular *exposés* to serious scholarly tomes.^{4, 5, 6} Geography-education from such a standpoint is simply one of numerous enterprises struggling with other flora and fauna for a rung on the ladder of academic life. In such a climate of internecine competition special pleading counts for naught. What matters is fitness, adaptability and the size and strength of one's forces.

In terms of sociology-of-knowledge factors, the illuminating insights of Joseph Schwab, the eminent science-educator, are still apodictical. Essentially, education is an applied field derived from a *mélange* of other feeder disciplines such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, history, political science and so forth. Unfortunately, the umbrella field of education tends to be treated by its devotees (anxious to overcome their prestige-deprivation vis-a-vis physics and biochemistry) as a pure, theoretical and coherent entity. As a consequence the products of 'educational research' are all too often spurious and specious. A theory appropriated from a specific feeder-discipline may be doctrinaire as in the case of personality theory or Bloom's taxonomy of objectives in the cognitive domain. Or should a "theory be adequate to its own subject matter, it begs or ignores questions about other subject matters. Theories of personality ... beg or ignore problems of social structure and ethics or merely dictate solutions to them."⁷ Theories of knowledge ignore problems of differential learning styles ... and so forth.

The truth of the matter — if credence be given to political sociologists — is subordinate to question of ideological hegemony.

Psychologization of Geography-Education

As it happens, psychologists of every description have become the dominant force in North American faculties of edu-

cation and have claimed ownership of the terrain for 'inquiry processes,' 'knowledge' and 'thinking skills' as part and parcel of what might be termed, the psychologization of education. In many jurisdictions, as a consequence, psychologists have been able to set the agenda of academic discourse and shape *en passant* the character of what passes for geography in the school by divesting the discipline of its critical knowledge and depotentiating its compelling synthetic and ikonic power to the mere consideration to the (pre-geographic) question "where?"⁸

Erosion of Operational Interface and Rapport Infrastructure for Geography-Education

The foregoing processes have been abetted by other factors of a structural nature. With the dissolution of the once legendary rapport infrastructure between academic geographers, geography-educators and geography/social-studies teachers in the schools, and the absence of any systematic operational interface between geographers and educational decision-makers, geography-education has become perilously detached from its mother-discipline. This fact is unwittingly underscored by comparing recent editions of the annual *Directory of the Canadian Association of Geographers* with those of the previous decade. The earlier directories list all known geography educators (about two dozen then) in their affiliational capacity with Canadian faculties of education (including publications and status of ongoing research). The recent directories give no such information whatsoever, as if the existence of geography-educators and their institutions had to be expunged from the record as no longer being of any interest to the mother-discipline.

This detachment from the parent discipline has not been paralleled by a number of other school subjects. Mathematics-education, science-education, guidance/counselling and psychology of education have all been gaining ground because of strong linkages to main-line university departments of mathematics, science and psychology, with cross-over teaching assignments between those departments and faculties of education. In contrast, a small platoon of geography-educators has been standing alone against a brigade of educational psychologists, outnumbered by a factor of 60 to 1.

Role of Academic Geography in the Rise and Fall of School Geography

Erosion of historical memory and its consequences

Canadian school geography owes its very existence to the seminal role of academic geographers of yesteryear who brought it into being. This obvious fact seems to have escaped the notice of a number of the younger generation of geographers who, in all likelihood, owe their careers to the public awareness of, and financial support for, their enterprise that was fuelled by the tremendous interest in, and expansion of, school geography in the 1960s. By the same token, the demise of school geography entails consequent erosion of geographic literacy that can only diminish the academic prestige and lustre of the parent-discipline as has already occurred at some American universities.

Griffith Taylor as Father of School Geography

The father of Canadian school geography is undoubtedly Griffith Taylor who, in the 1920s, had successfully promoted the discipline in Australian schools at the expense of the then-traditional Latin and Greek. This promotional skill proved equally useful at Chicago in 1927 and in 1936 when he founded Canada's first academic geography department at the University of Toronto which he chaired with great distinction for 17 years until his mandatory retirement in 1951 at the age of 70. A great deal of what happened subsequently in Canadian geography at all levels can be attributed to the ripple effect of this man's influence. With the aid of his able colleagues, particularly, Professors Donald Putnam and George Tatham,⁹ he proselytized a pre-war generation of geography students who were to see service in Europe and the Pacific. They were to return in 1945 with definite ideas of what applied geography was really all about and what it could do in the schools towards the betterment of the world if given half a chance. Their number was to be augmented by hordes of veterans who were to become university freshmen in the pursuit of theoretical geographic understanding. The zeal of the new discipline involved the other directions as well. The war effort itself required various geographic information services which, in turn, later helped to spawn, with the aid of Taylor & Co.'s alumni network, a number of other university geography departments across the country. In 1945, anticipating the Soviet Union's importance in world affairs Taylor, a serious student of the Russian language, spearheaded the creation of a Slavonic Studies department at the University of Toronto that would also offer courses in Slavonic geography. Concurrently, he facilitated

the lobbying of the Ontario Department of Education with a view to having Geography (as an alternative to Classics) introduced into school curricula. At Parkdale Collegiate in Toronto, Darryl Donaldson¹⁰ was thus able to introduce geography at the grade 9 level around 1947, then into grades 10 and 11, between 1948 and 1950. By 1958, thanks to the offices of Dr. Gustav Pleva, Chair of Geography at the University of Western Ontario, geography could be taken for academic credit at the grade 13 level, provided that a rather rigorous provincial examination in the subject could be passed — the pass rate being only 25 percent the first time around. Professor Taylor had also laid the groundwork for a school textbook series¹¹ whose revised editions came into prominence around 1960.

Ontario's Early Geography-Educators/Infrastructural Proliferation

The Ontario College of Education (O.C.E.) later to be known as the Faculty of Education, University of Toronto, had begun, in the late 1950s, to offer Type A certificates (i.e., specialist certification in geography-teaching for persons having an honours degree in geography). The first crop of specialists — all Taylor-Putnam-Tatham protégés — quickly moved into positions of educational influence. In 1961, at O.C.E., Bill Sager inaugurated North America's first chair in geography-teaching methods and thereafter geography training became rigorous. In 1965, Chuck Langman followed suit at the University of Western Ontario. In the meantime, Jim Smythe had written *Elements of Geography*, still in use across Canada today with co-author Charles Brown who was later to become first Director of the Metropolitan Toronto (Regional) Board of Education.

Archie Carnation, concurrently with Professor Bill Sager's elevation in 1961, became Ontario's first inspector of schools for geography. He used his mandate to 'persuade' principals and school boards to bring infrastructural support for geography-teaching 'up to snuff.' As a consequence, the level of resource materials, facilities and equipment, in many Ontario geography classrooms is still among the finest on the continent.

In the matter of support personnel, boards of education were required to establish geography headships. These positions were in turn supported by district-wide subject consultants or co-ordinators, and by the provincial inspectorate which numbered eight persons for geography by 1968.

The geography-education lobby had clearly become very influential thus contributing to the popularity of school-geography which had by then become the #1

subject-elective, and #2 overall after English (a mandatory subject).

Other contributing factors were the intrinsic merits of the discipline ably exemplified by numerous consummate practitioners plus the synergy within the lobby attributable to cross-overs of interest and to the interlocking directorates melding all the stakeholders into a cohesive whole. These agents consisted of teachers, subject-administrators, government officials, provincial geography-teachers' association, faculties of education, academic geographers from the universities and geographers engaged in other capacities.

Thus, to take a typical cross-over situation, Dr. Gustav Pleva, an academic from the University of Western Ontario had founded, in the post-war decade, the teachers' journal known as *The Monograph*, which for a time was the leading North American journal for geography-education. Indeed, in the mid 1970's the analogous *American Journal of Geography* asked if it could amalgamate with *The Monograph* which at the time had the superior circulation figures. The proposal did not fly.¹² However, even to this day, Ontario geography-educators have held key executive positions in the American-based National Council for Geography Education (NCGE). For example, Walter Kemball, a geography co-ordinator from the Toronto area became NCGE President in 1984.

The Pre-eminent Historical Role of Academic Geographers

An important fact emerges from the foregoing historical discussion: academic geographers at the universities played leading roles not only in placing geography in the schools but also in actively ensuring its viability and status. Drs. Putnam, Robinson, Scarfe, Tomkins, Weir, Owen, Walforth and Krueger were among those who wrote nationally popular geography textbooks for the schools. A number of universities took special care to ensure that their geography programs met the needs to teachers. The University of Waterloo and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) entered into special arrangements, whereby the latter provided financial guarantees for any specialist geography course that might otherwise be undersubscribed. Academic participation on teacher subject-councils was legendary. George Tomkins had initiated curricular reform in Canadian studies and then had involved teachers in working out the operational details. It was the academics who agreed, across the length and breadth of Canada, that teachers could be trusted to develop and implement curriculum instead of having it imposed upon them by faceless governmental bureaucrats.

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Reversal of Academic Involvement and the Demise of Geography- Education

The death of Dr. George Tomkins in April 1985 seemed to signal a reversal of academic involvement in geography-education that had been presaged by the retirements of Professors Putnam, Pleva and Tatham in the previous decade. The old pioneers were retiring and/or dying. By 1988, the number of regularly appointed academic geography-educators had gone from 24 to 5 (i.e., decreased by 79 percent).

Within a span of 3 years from 1985–88, Lew Robinson (a regular academic) and Angus Green had retired from UBC. A retired, but active, Neville Scarfe had died and so had George Tatham. The entire geography-education complement at Toronto evaporated as Professors Bill Sager, Dick Baine and Una Elliott all retired simultaneously in June, 1988. Alex Grime retired from Queen's at the same time. Chuck Langman and Spencer Inch had retired from The University of Western Ontario a couple of years previously. Ted Owen of Victoria had retired in 1986. Les Richards left the University of Saskatchewan in 1988. John Walforth had moved into administration and Peter Burpee into freelance consulting. A number of other professors at the smaller Canadian universities also retired or resigned during the late 1980s.

Despite this sudden spate of apparent vacancies in geography-education in only one instance was a departure replaced by a regular academic appointment. That single instance occurred at the University of Western Ontario. Most of the remaining vacancies were simply not filled, or, more frequently, were allocated to other education disciplines without so much as a whimper of protest from academic geographers working at the same universities. Yet it had been they themselves, or their forebears, who had sat on the selection committees for geography-educators in the previous decades.

The Present Situation

The current reward systems for academic geographers militate against the investment of time required to retrieve valuable historical memory and to interface with the various actors having a stake in school geography, to say nothing of devising and maintaining appropriate vigilance systems. The systematic interface between geographers and educational decision-makers has been very seriously eroded everywhere, with British Columbia having one of the worst situations in Canada. The advantages of a proper interface can be easily demonstrated by contrasting case studies which will be provided in a future article. Moreover — except for the University of British

Columbia and a few universities in Central Canada — dialogue between school geography-teachers and academics tends to be very accidental, and at times characterized by social apartheid. (The situation however, is much worse for history, where the Canadian relationship is characterized by mutual disdain, as attested to in a number of journal articles)¹³. Teachers do not want to be 'talked down to' or 'treated like peons' by the 'self-styled cognoscenti.' Positive cordiality and confraternal feelings, however, do characterize teacher/academic dealings about geography in parts of Ontario and in a number of jurisdictions beyond North America. In B.C. one finds the paradoxical situation of a major university geography department declining to provide appropriate courses (on the grounds of inconvenience to the status quo) to would-be elementary school-teachers, all of whom will be required to take Canadian history and geography pre-requisites as a result of recent mandates by the B.C. College of Teachers. Yet some members of this same department continue to bemoan the state of geographic illiteracy in the schools.

Dissipation of Geography's Historical Messianic Vision

Immediately after World War II, many veterans returning to education felt that the study of geography would make for a better world by helping to end all wars. This has not happened. Instead, geographers have splintered into more factions. Their messianic holism seems to have evaporated. Vigilance has disappeared as has the vision of the holy grail. Few people today believe that what passes for geography in most Canadian schools has much relevance to anyone beyond the world of its partisans. The pristine crusade seems to have been displaced by academic self-deception especially in those university departments that fail to tailor courses for teachers that are consonant with the needs of the school curriculum. An over-emphasis on physical geography in that regard only fuels the science-education lobby who also claims ownership of that 'turf.' As a result, the relevance of school-geography to the life world of young people comes into question. Physical geography and mere map-reading (gazetteering skills) do not fulfill the second half of James Fairgrieve's dictum (i.e., that knowledge of geography should enable students to visualize the historical drama or events taking place on the great world stage.)¹⁴ To reiterate, pupils do not get significant exposure to cultural, regional and political geography. Political geography is virtually untaught by academic departments as it has little or no grants payoff (despite tremendous, potential motivational payoff in the schools). We therefore need to ask, "Geographic literacy? — for what purpose?" Moreover, the view that school-

geography has integrative power is not supported by the research and is seen in some quarters as the pretentious puffery of vested academic interests. The rhetorical assertion concerning integration lacks psychological cogency, since only minds can integrate; disciplines cannot. One can retort with some justification that non-integration prevails where rank, untrained amateurs, lacking proper materials and facilities, teach the subject. Also, it may be that educational psychologists formulate questions in ways that justify their own existence. Perhaps geopsychologists need to look into the matter.

What Can Be Done?

Where history as a separate school subject is strong (as opposed to social studies), historians will often lobby for more geography (to enhance the explanatory power of history) as is currently the case in Florida. There can also be the corresponding danger of subsuming geography under world history. It took British geographers ten years to persuade their parliament to legislatively mandate the insertion of a comma to separate history and geography in their national School Act.

Geography is strongest in those industrialized nations having a national ministry of education since the relationship of geography to the national purpose is much clearer. In some jurisdictions, geography-education (preparation of geography-teachers) is handled as an offering by main-line, academic, geography departments (USSR, France). One, then, often finds that the chairperson of geography is also the chair of geography-education (e.g., Pinchemel, University of Paris; Honeybone, University of London). Articulation is then at its apogee and school-geography becomes very powerful.

At the time of writing this article, the British Columbia College of Teachers, which by recent legislative fiat has the political mandate to direct and reform teacher-education in B.C., is considering a system of cross-appointments whereby members of academic departments of geography, mathematics, chemistry and so forth, would teach some courses in faculties of education, while members of education faculties would also teach in the mainline academic departments. Conceivably then, fully credentialed geography-educators could become members of academic geography departments, on the grounds that geography-education is simply another geographic sub-specialty akin to geomorphology or urban geography. Given such powerful and proximate protection of its sisters, it is unlikely that geography-education could wither into oblivion.

As the present writer is one of but five university-based geography-educators still functioning in Canada, and inasmuch as his species is on the verge of extinction with his own biological mortality in ques-

tion, the memory of what has been said above will soon be lost, even if it is heard. Accordingly, it behooves the Canadian Association of Geographers to commission its own systematic investigation into the factors that have conduced to the decline and fall of school-geography in most regions of Canada over the past decade. Such an investigation could raise consciousness in a way that would impel corrective action, resulting in: 1. a resurrection, at a more potent level of efficacy, of the pristine vision that seems to have been lost; 2. a rebirth of the discipline's public educational mission; and 3. establishment of formal organic mechanisms that will spawn and maintain fully textured, operational interfaces between all principal actors in a dialogical drama so vital to the social, economic and cultural well-being of the nation.

Notes

1. Canadian Press 1989 'Where's Ottawa? 45% of Canadians flunk pollster's test' *Times Colonist*, Victoria, BC, July 3: 1 (headline)
2. Foster, C. 1988 'Putting Geography Back on the Map' *Artisan Science Monitor* January 28:17
3. Reagan, R. and U.S. Congress 1987 *Joint Resolution [and Rationale] of*

the 100th Congress of the United States of America re designation of a national Geography Awareness Week, (Washington, D.C.)

4. Caplow, T. and McGee, R. 1965 *The Academic Marketplace* (New York: Anchor)
5. Van den Berghe, P. 1970 *Academic Gamesmanship* (New York: Abelard-Schuman)
6. Clark, B. and Bayer, E. 1987 *The Academic Life* (Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation)
7. Schwab, J. 1978 *Science, Curriculum and Liberal Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago): 287
8. For a fuller discussion as to how the claims of educational psychologists ownership of the generic 'thinking-skills' terrain has denigrated the power of school-geography to inform 'thinking,' see Thomas, P. 1988 'Thinking Skills, Geography and the New Mythos' *Skills in Geographical Education Symposium '88* (Brisbane, Australia: Geographical Education Commission of the International Geographical Union): 126-137
9. The present writer studied under both Putnam and Tatham. The latter

was one of his sponsors for his present university position.

10. D. Donaldson was the present writer's first geography teacher.
11. Taylor, T.G. with Seiveright, D.J. and Lloyd, Trevor 1956 *Lands of Europe and Asia* (Toronto: Ginn)
Taylor, T.G. with Seiveright, D.J. and Lloyd, Trevor 1960 *Canada and Her Neighbours (Revisited)* (Toronto: Ginn)
Taylor, T.G. with Seiveright, D.J. and Lloyd, Trevor 1961 *Southern Lands (Revisited)* (Toronto: Ginn)
12. The present writer attended the discussions concerning the amalgamation of the *Journal of Geography* and *The Monograph* as he was then Executive Editor of the latter journal which is still published by the Ontario Association for Geographic and Environmental Education with Gary Birchall as Editor.
13. On this point, see especially, Bennett, P. 1988 'Blessed Are the Generalists' *The History and Social Science Teacher* 23(4): 188-189
14. Fairgrieve, J. 1949 *Geography in School* (London: University of London Press)

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