Becoming a Geographer by Peter Gould. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999.

In Peter Gould's (p. 3) chronological list of authors who have influenced him tucked between A. A. Milne and August Lösch is George Orwell. It seems appropriate. Like Orwell, Gould cares deeply about the uses and abuses of the English language, upholds the virtue of clear writing, is a dab hand at the withering phrase, and takes up political positions guaranteed to make him unpopular. Partly a collection of previous writings, partly a set of reminiscences, partly a summing up of a life's work well done, and partly a settling of old (and new) scores, Becoming a Geographer is a vivid, sometimes funny, sometimes caustic, but always compelling read. I often disagreed with Gould, but I was never bored by him, and never felt that this was old geezer geography. Gould says that there is no rehearsal for life. You have to get on with it, and do what you think is right. Every night is first night. Becoming a Geographer is a book written without a safety net.

My invocation of Orwell is useful for a second reason. Orwell was a book reviewer for much of his writing life, but disliked meeting authors because he felt he couldn't then write an honest review of their work. In the interests of disclosure, I need to say that I recently met Gould for the first time, and interviewed him for a project of mine (he even signed my review copy of his book). For this reason my review will not be honest, but I hope it is fair.

Gould's early life, which he describes in the Introduction, is as breathless as it is remarkable. Born in Surrey, England, at age 4 his mother took him to the Black Forest to stay with German relatives when the Depression made family life "literally unsupportable" (p. 8). Two years later he returned to England, only to be evacuated in 1940 to upstate New York in order to escape the blitz. In early 1945, he came back to

England albeit barely – his ship was torpedoed by a German U boat just off Glasgow - and he then spent a miserable year in a private school in Cornwall (again Orwell is germane – see his evocative description of the horrors of the English public school, "Such were the joys"). Then it was 5 years at Pangbourne naval college in Berkshire during which period Gould learnt not only to do traditional navy things like sail, tie knots and fire guns, but also to write and to be a geographer. Rebuffed for university entrance at Cambridge because of his lack of O level Latin, and a surly interview with the St. Catherines College geographer Gus Caesar, Gould was then conscripted for two years into National Service serving as an officer in the Gordon Highlanders. Sent to what was then Malaya during the Emergency, Gould had more close calls before he was de-mobilized in early 1953. Facing "bleak" prospects back at home in not-so-sunny Salcombe, Devon, "help" arrived in the form of a letter from his American "parents" inviting him to attend Colgate University and live with them (p. 23). The rest is history: a geography degree at Colgate, a Ph.D. at Northwestern working with Ned Taaffe, and then a brilliant professional career first at not-so-happy Syracuse, and from 1963 onwards in "Happy Valley" at Penn State culminating in an Evan Pugh professorship.

In documenting that brilliant career the book is organized into a series of thematic sub-sections reflecting Gould's multifarious interests over those years. Each begins with a brief introduction, and is followed by a set of short essays, many of which have been published elsewhere although often in outlets that are typically not main stream at least for human geographers. (Although I thought I had read a lot of Gould's previous work, about three-quarters of the chapters were new to me.)

Gould labels himself a "peripatetic geographer" (p. xiii). Such a description is true not only in terms of his physical movements (and characteristically illustrated by a map, including just as characteristically a calculation, in this case, his elasticity of travel space, p. 7), but even more so in terms of his intellectual perignations. He may be even more of a "restless analysis" than David Harvey. There is Gould's game theory phase, his mental map phase, and his Q analysis phase; his research on AIDS, on Chernobyl and environmental risk, and on development; his informed reading of Heidegger, Freud, and Lösch; and his regional interests in Ghana, Tanzania, Sweden and Portugal. Moreover, unlike many of his generation he keeps up with current debates on social theory providing interpretations along the way of Deleuze and Guattari, Said and Lacan.

This later work, however, has often created controversy both in print and on the occasions of its presentation. "Cathartic geography", a version of which was given at St. Andrews, Scotland, in 1996 is a good example. His pitch is that many of the writings in human geography from a cultural studies perspective – "postmodern, homosexual, radical feminist, postcolonialist, etc." – are marked "by a sense of emotional release [i.e., catharsis] on the part of the author, rather than the traditional aim of illuminating some aspect of our world" (p. 139). In short, they are just not geography. Of course, this is a well-worn argument, and ironically one that an earlier generation directed at Gould's own work (see his "The Augean period" which is reprinted here). More problematically, Gould's criticisms are couched in a language that is too sarcastic, too cutting, and too angry, resulting in a loss of credibility. The man simply protests too much. In defense he would probably say that that he only is giving as good as he gets, and that it is a matter of

high principle (“Sometimes you feel that things are just not right … and your sense of fairness wells to the surface” p. 79). But when many of the opponents at which he directs his sharpest criticisms are junior faculty, and in some cases were graduate students when they wrote their offending articles, I wish that Gould had carried out a rehearsal or two before first night.

I don’t want to dwell on this because there is much in the book that is sensible, illuminating, enjoyable and even inspirational. The essays on teaching scattered throughout the book were wonderful. I’ve marked passages that I intend to steal and use in my own lectures. Getting the right tone and level for an undergraduate audience is so difficult, but Gould manages to hit it unerringly and consistently. There was also a spiritual depth to Gould’s writings that I had not expected. I don’t mean mysticism; I’m sure he would have no truck with that. But underlying many of the essays is a concern with the human condition: what it means to be alive. Heidegger, who he first began to read in 1980 often in conjunction with the philosopher Joseph Kockelmans, is an obvious influence. Quotations from Heidegger pepper the whole text. In fact, if I could add to the volume it would be to have an explicit discussion of the impress of Heideggar’s work on Gould, which clearly goes all the way down.

Gould concludes his Introduction by relating a conversation that he had with Peter Haggett: “’You know Peter’ said the other Peter to me, ‘we were a blessed generation. We came in at the right time, and we’re getting out at the right time.’ And I could only agree” (p. 36). Such an ending is not fitting, however. There is no right time for Peter Gould to get out of the discipline. The values he represents - an intellectual restlessness,

doggedness, breadth and even cantankerousness - need to be always present. And so does he.

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