

RON JOHNSTON AND MICHAEL WILLIAMS (EDS) *A Century of British Geography*
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. Pp xvii + 674 £55 hardback)

I've now lived outside of Britain for a quarter of the century that is reviewed in the twenty (sometimes very) substantial essays that constitute this volume, a celebration (mainly) of a hundred years of British geographical achievements. I am one of the "émigrés," to use David Rhind's term. As a result, a lot of the material felt familiar. Names that I had not thought about in years flooded back – Woolridge and East, Dudley Stamp, Domesday geography, Barlow Commission, Town and Country Planning Act. It is like those times when I am back in Britain and bump into people who I've not seen since I left. I am glad to re-meet, to catch up, but afterwards I sometimes think too much has happened to allow for a satisfying reconnection. It is the same with this book. There are some excellent essays – in fact, nearly all the chapters are good, and which is remarkable for a volume of this nature and ambition – but I am also sometimes left wondering why, say, the Barlow commission, or the Town and Country Planning Act, once occupied such a prominent place in my thinking.

The volume is one of a series of centenary disciplinary celebrations published by the British Academy to mark its own centenary. As Johnston and Williams note in their Introduction, geography was a late entrant with Clifford Darby the first Fellow elected only in 1967. Currently, 18 Fellows of the British Academy are geographers, including the two editors of this book, as well as several of its contributors.

As showcase for the discipline, the volume works well. The writing is often very good – crisp, fluid, and lucid. Further, because many of the essays are substantial (fifty pages or more in some cases), arguments are well developed, and rich empirical detail provided. In fact, where the volume sometimes falters is in its last section – "Geography moving forwards" – where the essays are shorter than earlier ones, and therefore less developed and fleshed out.

The previous five sections are divided into discussions of the discipline's history, the environment, place, space, and geographical techniques. Ron Johnston's "The institutionalisation of geography as an academic discipline" in the first section is excellent, and I learnt much from this well crafted, meticulously researched, and knowledgeable chapter. It is about the ninety percent of the discipline that is not seen, but critical to the ten percent that is: the discipline's institutional infrastructure, and which includes schools, university departments, publishers, and learned societies like the British Academy. When institutional support is there, as it was through the RGS at the turn of the twentieth century, the discipline thrives, but when muted, as it was during the 1950s and 1960s when the "new universities" were founded, geography is shut out. While emphasising wider institutional undergirding, Johnston also argues that important to disciplinary success are galvanising, high profile individuals. It is not clear, though, how the latter squares with the former. Are such individuals born to greatness or have greatness thrust upon them by the institutional structure in which they are embedded?

Michael William's chapter "The creation of humanised landscapes" was my favourite in the section on "Environment." Nicely written, it reviews historical geography's varied attempts to integrate nature and culture. Slightly oddly, though, it begins with Carl Sauer. But then quickly moves to in effect Sauer's British counterpart, Clifford Darby. Indeed, in many ways Darby is

the central character in this volume, appearing, and reappearing in a number of the book's chapters. Dudley Stamp and Halford Mackinder, are important, but Darby is the abiding presence.

Darby's wartime activities are the focus of Hugh Clout's compelling chapter, "Place description, regional geography and area studies: the chorographic inheritance." He concentrates on the Naval Intelligence Handbooks produced during the Second World War, and in particular the role of Darby who became the key editor for producing the series at Cambridge (there was also a second centre at Oxford). The Handbooks were designed to provide regional geographical information to facilitate both military operations and later longer-term objectives once peace was secured. Clout argues that while the regional tradition in which these Handbooks were written could result in tedious, desiccated descriptions, it could produce some wonderful, vivid, and provocative ones too. For this reason, Clout regrets British geography's move over the last forty years to "abandon the practice of area studies and, in so doing, [to] reject part of its birthright" (p. 267).

One of the forces that led to that abandonment and rejection was the rise of social theory. In a deft juxtaposition, the editors have paired with Clout's essay an equally compelling chapter by perhaps the two most well known purveyors of social theory in British geography, Doreen Massey and Nigel Thrift, "The passion of place." It is one of my favourites. It consists of both a review of how place has been treated theoretically in the past, as well as offering a set of numbered precepts for thinking about it in the future (and based on Thrift's recent ruminations about non-representational theory). Entirely theoretical, it manages to live up to what I initially imagined was an ironic title, but is not. It is an essay passionate about place.

The section on space that follows was a slight let down. Peter Taylor's chapter, 'Global, national, local' was the most formulaic of all the chapters in the volume. In contrast, Ron Johnston's "Order in space: geography a discipline in distance" was much better, offering a substantial review and analysis of British spatial science. Lacking in his account, however, were the intricate multiple institutional and personal histories that Johnston was so good at revealing and putting to interpretive use in his earlier chapter.

In any case, space was well dealt with in the fifth section about "Geography in action," that included reviews of cartography, GIS, and spatial modelling techniques. I especially liked "Geography displayed: maps and mapping" by Roger Kain and Catherine Delano-Smith. Truth be told, I groaned silently before I began the chapter given that it is sixty pages long, and my most embarrassing experiences as a geographer are intimately connected with drawing maps. But the essay was lively, beautifully illustrated, crammed with interesting facts and information, theoretically informed, and most important of all, it did not require me to put ink to mylar.

A Century of British Geography is a finely produced, and finely written volume. Whether other Fellows from the British Academy will read it to appreciate the contributions of the last hundred years of geography is unclear. But they should, and if they do, they will.