

Geographical Voices: Fourteen Autobiographical Essays

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I just finished Michael Cunningham's (1998: 225) The Hours, a novel about the lives of three twentieth century women, the last paragraph of which begins: "We live our lives, do whatever we do, and then we sleep – it's as simple and ordinary as that.... There's just this for consolation: an hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we've ever imagined." The best of the 14 autobiographical essays by the all male cast of senior geographers collected in Geographical Voices are about those hours, the moments that "burst open." Such moments are often private – all the essayists write about their childhood, and in Brian Berry's case, it forms the majority of his chapter – but because of whom they are, such moments later become public: the seminars at Gunnar Olsson's home at 2128 Geddes Avenue, Ann Arbor, that contribute to Birds in Egg; David Harvey's weekly forays to the Left Bank Jazz Club, Baltimore, that merge into his writing of Social Justice and the City; and Reg Golledge's devastating onset of ischematic optic neuropathy followed by a chance conversation with his dentist that leads to almost twenty years of research and writing on the spatial abilities of the visually impaired.

I read the collection like a novel, in a single sitting, and not finishing until the early hours of the morning. And for good reason. There were heroes (Mr Urch and Dr Giles, two schoolmasters of Brian Berry) and heroines (Gerd Enequist, Gunnar Olsson's supervisor at Uppsala). There were villains (for Karl Butzer the Full Professoriat at the University of Wisconsin during the early 1960s), dirty deeds (for David Harvey, George Carter, the Geography

chair at Johns Hopkins turning in Owen Latimore to Joseph McCarthy's Senate Committee on Un-American Activities), and shadowy figures and organizations (plain clothes officers outside Berry's Grammar School, and the Office of Strategic Services, and its successor, the CIA, in Butzer's, and Woody Pitts's essays). There were disappointments (William Garrison's Ph.D. thesis at Northwestern University), lucky breaks (the said Ph.D. thesis subsequently being lost by the library), and outside recognition (Donald Meinig is lionised by the fictional Jim in a James Michener novel). There were major historical events (Richard Morrill was a child living at Pearl Harbour in December, 1941; Gilbert White was interned in Vichy France; a peripatetic Yi-Fu Tuan was only ever one step ahead of the invading Japanese army in China; and the bows of the destroyer on which Leslie Curry served as a radar mechanic were blown off at Anzio in the invasion of Italy). And there were the sometimes-crushing external social forces that directly or indirectly shape a life's work (the all-white town of Crown Point, Indiana, in John Borchert's chapter; or the pernicious effects of class arrogance, and all too apparent in the chapters by the three English contributors – Berry, Curry, Harvey – but in no one else's.)

The stories were always compelling, always well written, always shedding light on the intellectual direction and specific works associated with the author. They illustrated for me, at least, the powerful impress of context – social, cultural, political, historical, and geographical. These men were not just isolated brains in vats – Hilary Putnam's image – but fully embodied, responding to the place and time in which they found themselves: in European and Pacific theatres of war, in a Cold War America promoting science, technology and planning, in dingy University basements or attics engaging with calculating machines and early computers, and in 1960s NSF workshops, or at exotic foreign conferences, or on the streets protesting for civil rights in Seattle, Detroit and Baltimore. In this sense, there is a disjuncture between claims to an

abstract rationalism found in some of these essays, and reflected in the theoretical and quantitative work that made the academic reputations of more than half of the contributors, and the stories that are told which are about social embeddedness, luck and serendipity, passion and conviction, the power of place and landscape, poignancy and tragedy, grace and compassion, mistakes and muddles, and truth regained

The centrality of place (but not central places) is a theme reoccurring repeatedly, and not necessarily among authors you would expect. You would think it would be in Tuan's contribution – after all, he coined the term “topophilia” – but it is not. Instead, the invocation of place is most vividly found in essays by two intellectual opponents, both of whose reputations were made on the manipulation of logical abstractions, not evocative concrete descriptions: Brian Berry and David Harvey. Berry's richly drawn account of Gainsborough, Lincolnshire, during the Second World War reminded me of John Boorman's 1987 film, Hope and Glory, about his childhood in the London blitz. Horrible things happened, lives were undone, but it could be incredibly exciting as a kid, with parents distracted, and bombed out towns and cities becoming giant playgrounds. Harvey also was child during the war – he is a year younger than Berry – and while he recalls ducking from falling V1 rockets, the most redolent passages of his essay recall schoolboy cycling trips made along the lanes of the Kent countryside. His writing is elegiac, strangely moving, with nary a capitalist, or worker, or accumulation crisis in sight. Both are wonderful essays, and alone are worth the price of the book.

The last sentence of The Hours is: “we hope, more than anything, for more” (Cunningham, 1998: 225). For that novel, this means more life, more moments that “burst open.” For this review, I would like it to mean more lives told of the kind found in this collection. As a discipline, geography is overly presentist, even in its own histories, and not

good on biography. The autobiographical essays in this volume begin to rectify this deficiency.

We need more hours, we need more Geographical Voices.

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Reference

CUNNINGHAM, M. 1998 The Hours (New York: Picador)