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Geographical Problems in Boundary Making: Discussion

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uniformly parallel to the coast it might have been an ideal boundary, but the geographical impossibility of such a disposition of nature seems hardly to have been recognized, and the question resolved itself into the determination of an irregular line in a mountain region which should never be more than 10 leagues from the ocean, and which should accord as far as possible with the condition of parallelism to the coast. This involved the secondary question of what is the coast line in such an archipelago of islands and islets as that with which the tribunal had to deal. The condition of strictly following its sinuosities was an impossible one. The tribunal finally decided on a line which was a mountain boundary practically in accordance with the contention of the United States. The line joined certain peaks marked on a map attached to the award forming a sinuous boundary about 30 miles from the general trend of the shore, and is, presumably, a line which it would be impossible to demarcate. The question of the course that the line should take from the point of commencement to the entrance to the Portland Channel formed an important branch of the award. This involved the right of occupation to certain islands. By the decision of the tribunal (with the strong dissent of two of the British members) the channel of the treaty was decided to be that which passes to the north of Pearce and Wales Islands, and which transfers two other important islands, Silklan and Kanna-ghunut, commanding the channel, to the United States, from Canada. The indignation which was aroused in Canada by this decision is a matter of comparatively recent history. It did, in fact, ignore one of the most important principles of boundary making when a compromise is in question. In the scheme for a fair and useful division between rival claims generally, it is most important to preserve the entity of any one concession in particular. For instance, to divide a valley so that water sources are on one side and the irrigable lands on the other, is merely to invite the trouble which it is the whole object of a boundary to prevent. In this case the right of navigation through the channel to Canada, and the command of the channel to America by the cession of these islands, certainly seems to be a mistake.

The PRESIDENT : Turning to our business for the evening, as you will have seen, Mr. Compton, who was to have read a paper on New Caledonia, has been prevented by illness from doing so. In these circumstances our old friend and Vice-President, Sir Thomas Holdich, has come forward at very short notice and proposes to read a paper, which I am sure will be interesting, on a subject on which he is better qualified to speak than anybody in this country, that is, on frontiers and how they have been, and ought to be, demarcated.

(Sir Thomas Holdich then read the paper printed above and a discussion followed.)

Sir FRANCIS YOUNGHUSBAND : Sir Thomas Holdich is, I suppose, the greatest authority in the world on the practical work of demarcation of frontiers. He has demarcated the frontiers of various countries from the Andes to the Himalayas. It is commonly assumed by the man in the street that Governments are extremely stupid and lacking in foresight ; but Governments do have

lapses of intelligence and sometimes show a certain amount of foresight. It is quite twenty years ago that the Home Government telegraphed to the Viceroy of India asking him to advise them as to what should be the permanent frontier between the Russian and Indian Empires to the north of India, in order that the Government might know up to what point they should extend their influence if necessary, and beyond which line they should on no account involve themselves in liabilities. I happened to be at Simla at the time when this telegram arrived, and was asked by the Foreign Secretary to mark on the map what in my opinion should be that frontier between the Indian and the Russian Empires. I had in the years 1887, 1889, 1890 and 1891 been exploring on the northern frontiers of our Indian Empire, and the Government at any rate on that occasion not only showed foresight in asking for information as to a good line of frontier, but they did also as a matter of fact consult the man who had had some experience of it on the spot. It happens, however, that when foresight is shown the event foreseen does not always come to pass, and the advance of the Russians down towards our Indian Empire in the north which had been anticipated twenty years ago, has not occurred from that time till now. Sir Thomas Holdich has referred to the unsuitability of the River Oxus as a line to mark the sphere of influence. That line was suggested by Lord Granville in the year 1873. Looking at a map the Oxus seems to furnish a very suitable line between ourselves and the Russians, and here in London it had been assumed that the River Oxus would be an adequate line between the Russian sphere of influence and the British up from India. But in the lower parts the river, as Sir Thomas Holdich has shown, wanders over a wide open plain and becomes an exceedingly unsatisfactory boundary. In the upper parts Sir Thomas thought it was a better one, but my impression in that region was that even there also the river is not a good boundary, because in certain states there are villages on both banks. The villages on one side we have given to the Russians, and the villages on the other side we have kept for Afghanistan. I remember years ago as a young officer out in India, like many other young officers, thinking the Government at home very simple-minded, that they should believe that by simply laying down boundary pillars in the wilds of Central Asia they would keep back the Russian advance towards India. We thought the Russians would not pay much attention to those lines of pillars in the middle of deserts and mountains. But the boundary was demarcated by Sir Thomas Holdich and other officers, and it is a fact that from that time to this it has been strictly respected by the Russian Government. Since 1891 when I was myself arrested on the banks of the Oxus there has been no frontier "incident" between us, and I think that is an exceedingly satisfactory thing to be able to say.

Colonel C. E. YATE: I think after what Sir Thomas Holdich has told us there is little I can say. I think he has explained most thoroughly to us the extraordinary difficulties that have to be met by the laying down of boundaries by our Government in advance over lines of which they had no knowledge. He has given us instances of all sorts of different definitions of boundaries—mountains and rivers, and a boundary that was to run, as he told us, "about 4 miles from the river," and he has showed us in his photographs how utterly impossible it was to demarcate such a boundary. He has also recalled to us instances of boundaries defined as running "along the foothills," and pointed out how impossible it was to find out what the "foothills" were, and how hopeless it was to endeavour to come to any agreement on such definitions. Naturally where there are foothills the people in the plains work their way up into the little valleys between the various spurs to a considerable distance,

and I can remember a case in my own personal experience in which this had led to all sorts of troubles and fights and encounters between the two parties. It was a tremendous difficulty to settle a boundary along "foothills." Then again the lecturer illustrated to us the disadvantages of a "straight line." When you come to settle a boundary, the watershed of a mountain range or a big river with fixed banks is the only really permanent geographical feature you can fix a boundary on satisfactorily. If you can only get a divide between two countries you may then get a permanent boundary. All artificial boundaries lead to trouble. We can thoroughly realize the enormous expense incurred in maintaining that long straight line of the Canadian boundary which Sir Thomas Holdich has told us about. We can only hope that this laying down of boundaries in advance without any geographical knowledge of what the countries are like through which the boundary commissions have to work will cease in the future, and that the Government will come to this Society and to other sources where information is available as to what are the real natural features of the country through which the boundary has to be laid down before finally deciding upon it. Sir Thomas Holdich has told us how much good work the Society has done, and I think we can only trust that this will be recognized by the Governments concerned in the future, and we hope there will be more reference to the Geographical Society than there has been in the past before future boundaries are agreed to.

Prof. SPENSER WILKINSON: I do not think we have heard anything to-night that requires criticism in the sense of fault-finding or disagreement. I should like to say I have had this evening a very rare and great pleasure in hearing a most interesting subject expounded by probably the most competent man in the world to present it, and we have heard two other gentlemen following him who are, as near as can be, the men who, next to the lecturer, have the largest experience of this business. I discussed the matter a good many years ago with Sir John Ardagh, who had a good deal to do with the demarcation of the frontier between Greece and Turkey, and there is one remark I should like to be permitted to make. We have heard the difficulties of demarcating the frontier after it has been delimited by diplomatists, and it no doubt seemed as though diplomatists were very stupid people; but I should like to say a word, not in defence of anybody, but to explain how this may come about. As a rule these frontier disputes arise in conditions which, as you have heard, are very likely to lead to wars. Feeling is much strained on both sides, and we have two countries finding they may come to war on a point of honour when it is really a question of geographical definition. Consider what the unfortunate diplomatists have to do. They want to avoid a war, and at last they hit upon a form of words on which both sides can manage to agree, and this formula is given to geographers to interpret. I am rather inclined to think it is quite worth while to pay the expenses of the geographers and to give them all the difficulties of the demarcation, rather than to have a war over the question. I think you will find many of these questions, as soon as they touch national susceptibilities, always become increasingly difficult. There was the instance of the Newfoundland Fisheries which caused a great deal of trouble between France and this country. If you go back and look at the negotiations you will find that the unsatisfactory definition of the Treaty of Utrecht was repeated several generations later in the Treaty of Paris, and the fact was that the political relations between the Governments did not enable the British negotiators to press their point as far as they might have done. You generally find that where there has been an unsatisfactory boundary it has been because

the Government which negotiated it did not feel inclined to press its view to the point of war, and was ready to compromise in order to get a treaty. That is very often the reason why you get these unsatisfactory definitions. These were the conditions when Gladstone's Government negotiated with the Russian Government about the border of Afghanistan. The real difficulty lay not primarily in geographical definition, but in the view which this country was taking of policy. It was a period when we had a Government very anxious to keep the peace rather than to be self-assertive. You see the results in the trouble afterwards caused to the geographers. I do not think these difficulties are primarily due to the carelessness of Governments in regard to geographers, but rather to the weakness of policy or to the beliefs prevailing as to what policy should be. I think you will agree with me that the progress of geography has made geographical definition very much easier than it was fifty years ago or a century ago, and where policy is satisfactory, I do not suppose there is likely in the future to be very much difficulty about a reasonable delimitation, which will probably leave comparatively—I won't say easy—but less ambiguous than it used to be, the subsequent work of demarcation. I should like to express the delight with which I have listened to the lecture and the instruction I have derived from it.

Mr. H. F. J. BURGESS expressed a desire to raise two points. He objected to the introduction of politics which had taken place since the war at the Society's meetings. He also disapproved of the employment of military men in the arrangement and demarcation of frontiers.

The PRESIDENT: I must first deal summarily with the last speaker's remarks. It is true that, in so far as they affect "party," Politics have as a rule been excluded from our discussions. But where national interests and geographical knowledge are bound up together this custom does not hold good; least of all can it do so at a time when "party" is practically in abeyance. As to the second point, a more unfortunate occasion than the present for raising it, for disparaging the work done by our engineer officers in delimiting frontiers, could hardly have been chosen. As all who have followed recent events in South America are aware, the delimitation between the Argentine Republic and Chili, carried out at the request of the Governments concerned by Sir Thomas Holdich and his colleagues, has been the means of preventing a war which threatened to be long and ruinous to two young and growing States. So highly was their work appreciated in South America that when a similar dispute arose between Peru and Bolivia the statesmen on both sides applied for the help of British officers, with this difference—that instead of appealing to His Majesty's Government they came to the Council of the Royal Geographical Society and begged us in the final resort to act as arbitrators.

I proceed to the general question. During this Session we have had several lectures on frontiers in civilized countries. I fear that in Europe the ideal frontier from the professorial point of view will never be attained. There are too many factors to be taken into consideration: there are the physical, racial, commercial and military factors, and it is very rare indeed that you get such a perfect frontier as the range of the Pyrenees—or, I may add, the British Channel. I am afraid we shall never see absolutely scientific frontiers (scientific from every point of view) between old countries. Nationalities show no proper respect for water-partings. In new countries, however, it is a different matter. There the difficulties are of quite another order. I confess I have been very much interested in hearing Prof. Spenser Wilkinson's apology for statesmen and diplomatists, for I felt during the lecture that they very much required

some apology. I cannot, however, entirely fall in with his line of argument. Their frequent vagueness may possibly on occasions have saved us from war, but it seems to me that it has far more often brought us to the very edge of war, if not actually into war.

We have had some curious instances given us to-night. It throws an odd light on the psychology of nations, or their rulers, when we are reminded that the United States were once not too proud to be ready to fight for a small Pacific island! When we hear of such incidents as the way in which the boundary of Uganda and the Congo State was drawn along an unascertained line of longitude we cannot but feel that the diplomatists had better have consulted geographers and travellers before they committed themselves on paper. Their traditions stood in the way: what these traditions were I may best illustrate by a personal anecdote. Some years ago, while I was one of the Honorary Secretaries of the Society, I received an official letter from the Foreign Office signed by the then Secretary of State and sent in reply to a protest made by the Council against the exclusion of Geography from the subjects for examination for Foreign Office clerks. The gist of the letter was, that all the geography needed by a Foreign Office clerk could be picked up in his first few months in the Department.

Again I call to mind how one of our most distinguished Proconsuls, the late Sir Lambert Playfair, told me that only once on his many returns from foreign posts had he been met on reporting himself at the Foreign Office by anyone who cared to ask questions and listen to his replies. The exception was our frequent guest, Lord Bryce. I remember too a chance meeting with Sir John Kirk, when he exclaimed, "My life's work in Africa has just been given away in London." To-day we can reflect with satisfaction that General Smuts is putting that right, and that Kilimanjaro, the top of Africa, is no longer a German mountain!

I would not deny that there is something to be said in excuse of the official attitude. It is hard on statesmen to be called on to give their attention to details in matters which are alien to their usual interests. But where the political or military business in hand is seriously affected by geographical facts and considerations these must be taken into account under pain of disastrous consequences. It is needless to give recent instances. This war will make many changes; may we hope that among them will be a change in our official attitude, and that we shall learn to think geographically as well as imperially.

I must add, in conclusion, one word of thanks to my old colleague Sir Thomas Holdich for having come at very short notice to our rescue and given us such a masterly discourse.

NIGHT MARCHING BY STARS.

E. A. Reeves.

Read at the Afternoon Meeting of the Society, 13 April 1916.

THE subject which I have been asked to bring before you this afternoon is doubtless one of the oldest with which we could possibly deal. The heavenly bodies have from the earliest days been the natural guides of the traveller. Long before the magnetic compass was known, at any rate in Europe, men found their way across unexplored oceans and