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A QUARTER-CENTURY IN GEOGRAPHY

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A review of the past twenty-five years in geography, with a forward look, is the pleasant task which the editor has assigned to me. A real history of this period would be impossible within the space available and is rendered quite unnecessary by Professor Whitbeck's admirable survey in his address as President of the National Council of Geography Teachers.¹ Reference may here be made also to a recent paper by the present writer.²

There remains therefore to make a few running observations on this quarter century of the evolution of geography and of geography teaching and to forecast the needs and possible progress of the time just before us. We observe first of all that it has taken a long time to make even the intelligent public know that there is, what it is fair to call, a new geography. By this we mean of course a theme which is milleniums old, enriched by new content, by new ways of teaching and by fresh applications to life. Not many months ago there appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* a sentimental writing on geographic education which was altogether naïve and quite amusing in its unruffled assumption that the writer had made a fresh discovery of human and rational possibilities in an old and traditionally dry school subject. We believe it was an educational authority of eminence who was quite sure that anybody could get all the geography he needed, when he needed it. Thus much of the public even yet needs primary instruction about our subject.

It is no disgrace to geography that its progress, as is true of all movements, has been by zigzags. We have wandered more or less from the air line that leads to the goal, but we have been keeping the general direction. There was in the first years of our period strong, and as some thought undue emphasis on physical laws and land forms. This is attributed to the powerful influence of the Committee of Ten. But this is the very impulse that not only projected physical features in something of their vast significance, but actually led us into the field of the causal and the human which we now properly regard as of vital meaning. There was no squandered energy.

¹ "Thirty Years of Geography in the United States," *Jour. of Geog.*, Vol. XX, Apr., 1921, pp. 121-128.

² "Geographic Education in America," Report of the Smithsonian Institution for 1919, (appearing in the autumn of 1921).

The Association of American Geographers held its first meeting in Philadelphia in 1904. Out of twenty papers on its program, but one touched a human phase of geography. That condition changed rapidly, and in all recent programs papers dealing purely with physiographic subjects have been rare. We may have made an error in our non-human high school geography, but we should refrain from the other extreme, a neglect of the physical and a baseless human treatment.

GEOGRAPHIC INFLUENCE

We have learned much in twenty-five years of those relations which we commonly gather up under the category of geographic influence. This was not a new idea but it has been freshly stated and illustrated, has aroused interest and has helped clothe that structure of physiography which some have seemed to think a bare and repellent skeleton of dry bones.

In not a few cases this principle has been glibly enunciated, superficially exploited and compelled to support conclusions, drawn without adequate inductive material and in disregard of other types of causation which root themselves far back in the twilight depths of the evolutionary process. Hoggarth has recently commented on a certain American tendency to carry this sort of explanation too far. Nevertheless the doctrine has been largely fruitful and errors in its use are not likely to destroy its value. Not a few courses of study offered in the higher schools are specifically centered here, tho there are those of whom the present writer is one, who would seek rather to enrich all geographic courses by applying the principle within the limits of truth and of reasonable hypothesis.

TEXTBOOKS

Current conceptions of geography find expression and further development in the textbooks of the time. The Committee of Ten gave voice to a powerful reaction from pure memory work and locational study. This reaction has shown but sporadic signs of reaching its limit and we still mark an occasional altitude of mild, but rather lofty contempt for something deemed outworn, uneducative and of little value.

Our textbooks are now seeking to offer a fairly balanced emphasis on facts and principles in the physical, locational, causal and human fields. We do not exaggerate land form, dynamic changes and climatic conditions, but make use of them. We mark the appalling ignorance of

location shown by high school students, by college men and women, by the average citizen, by public servants, and we try to invent non mechanical schemes to fix such information, not being sure that a statesman should be obliged to hold up an international conference, while he learns from an adviser where an important region is. It is not too much to say that all our textbooks of elementary geography are seeking to set forth as best they can, and with due symmetry, all the great phases of their subject.

As to their degree of success there are, and will be, sundry opinions. A representative of one of our larger universities cites, with apparent assent, the opinions of educators and curricula makers who think our texts are quite inadequate to meet present day requirements. In the same number of a certain periodical, a spokesman from another university, with an experience of many years covering the entire range of geographic education, expresses his conviction that "by far the greatest gain that has been made in the past thirty years in the field of elementary geography is this gain in the character of textbooks."

Of one thing we may be sure—that our texts are not likely to elicit a drab uniformity of opinion. This is well, for it betokens anything but that alleged soporific condition of geography, from which some non-geographic educators prognosticate its early disappearance into the pedagogical graveyard.

METHODS OF TEACHING

There is no sign of the disappearance of the textbook, tho there is a growing and worthy freedom from slavish dependence upon it. Various teaching methods receive their special emphasis at sundry times. Ideal journeys, topics, types, problems and projects come now and then to the fore. All these devices have long been used and will continue to be used by good teachers who know their subjects, who know the springs of youthful interest and use their invention and energy to bring geography home.

There is what may be called an *a la carte* method of education. We are not now discounting the value of elections in mature studies. We are referring to the implication that memory work and serious labor are to be discarded, that all processes may be sweetened, that the pupil may be beguiled into learning and the school hours be remembered as a pleasant social dream. The boy is not to be held to anything, if he does not experience the need of it, and the joy of it *now*.

This may be regarded as a caricature of some of our modern pedagogical notions, but we have not, I think, exaggerated the danger, in

the light of the recent pronouncement of the head of a college of wide repute, giving in substance the conviction that the curriculum in a college is of value, but not the most weighty part of the college course. This type of view has gained vogue in all grades of our education and in all subjects. Perhaps geography has suffered as little from it as any subject in the school circle.

SUBJECT MATTER

A further brief remark may be had upon the subject matter of geography in coming years. The physical will keep a real place and included in it, and flowing from it, will be a larger attention to the principles and applications of climatology. The study of regions will always be important and may be given a fascinating interest. So-called geographic influences must not be handled loosely, but coordinated with, and not infrequently subordinated to, the influence of race, the forces of history, and all of those currents of hereditary and other human influences, some clear, some dark and enigmatic, which have controlled political geography and many movements of trade.

Commercial geography will call for enlarged standing room, not merely because it may have vocational uses, but because it stands close to the heart of human geography, and as taught not only within, but above the realm of statistics, has vital educational value.

We look ahead to a vast development in the making and educational use of maps, to a sane use of moving pictures, and to the effective coming in of the geographical field excursion. Based on and vivified by all these factors, political geography and the study of countries will acquire new meaning and proceed on a higher plane.

PROGRESS OF GEOGRAPHY

In casting thought backward over the quarter century, must we regard our meager achievements and our failures, with humiliation, or may we have courage out of what has been wrought and look ahead as from higher ground with buoyant expectation? A recent discussion by a teacher of history offers interestingly a frank criticism of the failure of geographers to organize their subject for the modern curricula, and suggests that further delay may jeopardize geography's place in the school program.³ This writer thinks the school has had to wait too long for "the expert to organize his own thinking." The Committee on Social Studies of the National Educational Association got "nothing

³ The Relation of Geography to the Social Studies of the Curriculum, Daniel C. Knowlton, *Jour. Geog.*, Vol. XX, Sept., 1921, pp. 225-234.

but empty promises" from the geographers; "He, (the geographer) must cease expecting the subject to shift for itself or wait upon his good time for the attention which it deserves."

The case is not so serious as these quotations indicate. None more deeply than geographers deplore the deficiencies in geographic education. The modern geographer has often been appalled at the size of his task. With scarce an exception no geography was taught in the universities and colleges of America twenty-five years ago. A relatively small number of these schools teach it today. The geographer has had it before him to create a status for his subject in every grade of education. Suppose that this poverty had been true of other school subjects—English, mathematics, foreign languages, history. Assume that these great subjects had not been taught in the higher schools until recent years and that even now only a few of them thought such bodies of knowledge were worth teaching. Could their experts be fairly charged with failure if they had not yet leavened the whole lump?

Every geographer who is doing his task, sometimes with dogged will and endurance, but now and again with resiliency and power, may take heart from the laws of educational progress. School subjects are not made and unmade upon occasion. Courses of study, reports of committees, the making of textbooks, the interchanges of thought in teachers' conventions—all these contribute to progress, but no one of them is epochal in importance. "Crises" do not arise, to put all at stake, in a moment of time.

To reach tens of thousands of poorly equipped teachers, to start a stream of modern geography that will flow from the highest sources to the remotest acre of the plains, this is an undertaking as big as it is inspiring. Why not rejoice that some corners of the desert are already fruitful and take these as cheering samples of what can be done? Rational geography has had its place in America thru a period little longer than is required for a baby to become a college graduate. Another quarter of a hundred years will see it well planted in the greater part of its proper domain.

FORWARD LOOK

The writer has elsewhere attempted a rough prophecy of geographic development during the coming decades, and will append it here.⁴

"The next thirty years will go far to achieve the growth and realize the aims that will round out a century since gazeteer geography held the field. Geography will, we believe, become a cardinal theme in

⁴ Geographic Education in America. Smithsonian Rep., 1919.

elementary and secondary teaching, that our youth may be fitted to live in a world of nature, of resources, of races and nations. There is perhaps no other subject which so well pictures what that world is and so effectively links together and utilizes the combined harvest of the natural and social sciences.

"Out of such perfected geographic training will come not only effective intelligence for citizenship but the training of experts for commercial undertakings, for military necessities, for consular and diplomatic work and for the intensive study of new or little known regions.

"Along with strong development in education from lowest to highest, will proceed the perfection of our maps, those summaries of geographic education which may be made to express visually the relief, the resources, the industries, the distribution of people and almost every phase of human activity in any and every part of the earth.

"So far as expression can set forth the facts and principles of man and the earth, the finished product of geography will more and more be found in thoro, attractive and informing descriptions of regions. We have had, and must always have various types of description, the gazeteer, the guide book, the encyclopedia article, the popular notes of the unprofessional traveller and the special or technical report. All these, however, should contribute to, and in turn be enriched by regional descriptions which are scientifically accurate, serious without being too technical, expressed in good literary form and giving balanced, interesting and useful knowledge, for the man of business, diplomacy or pleasure, who needs to know the particular region. Even travellers see but a small part of the world, they deal in samples and they must exhibit and exchange their wares in order that any one may know the earth widely.

"The world's stock of geographic knowledge has been gathered thru multitudinous agencies thru the centuries. Commerce, war, love of adventure, thirst for knowledge, immigration to new lands for a fresh experiment in living; all have had their part. It remains for geographic education to order this mass of material, develop geographic principles and help towards a better use of the earth and its gifts."