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Notes on a Geographical Canon? Measures, models and scholarly enterprise

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Abstract

This paper provides an introduction to the theme issue by placing recent discussions about the geographical canon within scholarly debates about canonicity. Geographers have been generally silent about canon but, to the contrary, possess a sophisticated grasp of related concepts such as tradition and paradigm. It is argued that there is no clear canonical conception that geographers should adopt, but that further attention towards the canonical is nevertheless merited. Engagement with the geographical canon is not prescriptive. Rather, its construction will be a personal choice that involves engagement with a broader community of scholarship. In doing so, though, productive avenues are created for consideration of the texts, habits and practices that identify geography. It is concluded that debates about canonicity provide much for considerations of historiography and pedagogy by geographers.

Keywords

canon; canonicity; History of geography; intellectual history; tradition

Running Title

Notes on a geographical canon?

Except when the true ecclesiastical canons are their topic, people who use the word 'canon' usually have in mind quite practical issues. They may, for example, be stating that there is for students of literature a list of books or authors certified by tradition or by an institution as worthy of intensive study and required reading for all who may aspire to professional standing within that institution. Or they may be disputing the constitution of the canon, or even the right of the institution to certify it. Frank Kermode, 1986.¹

It is perhaps worth emphasizing that our disciplinary forbears were neither fools nor heroes, but intelligent and sophisticated people who were writing – as do we – to advance human knowledge and understanding, not to provide conveniently packaged modules for future use in teaching the history of the subject. It would be an admission of our own ignorance, not theirs, to fail to take their works with the seriousness they deserve. Tim Ingold, 1986.²

The problem with canons is that they provide more questions than answers. The language of canons is common but uneven across the humanities, social sciences and, to some extent, the natural sciences. Geography, typically, has had an ambivalent relation to its canon. Many geographers would dispute that there is, or ever was, a geographical canon. Historical geographers, if they have talked of canons at all, have tended to do so only in ironic terms.³ On the other hand, members of affiliated fields, such as historians of cartography, have had no problem discussing, for example, the recent 'redefinition and expansion of the canon of early maps.'⁴ This theme issue presents a collection of papers that investigate this situation and consider why it has become so controversial. In order to examine these issues with any seriousness, it is first necessary to understand the divergent and contested definitions of canon. A central argument that I wish to make is that there is no single concept of canon against which to measure the geographical canon. There is no superior notion of canonicity that geographers can import, and then use to (re)generate a set of canonical texts. Geographers cannot simply 'find' their canon by excavating the writings of past geographers.

Rather, by examining conceptions of canonicity, an opportunity exists for the revivification of discussions around the purpose, identity and practices of geography.

BY OUR CANON YOU SHALL KNOW US?

The Ancient Greek term *kanôn* referred to a straight rod or bar used by a carpenter or weaver as a measure. Later, canon became an accepted term for a model used in the law or in art. The earliest known application of canon to describe written text was that by Dionysius of Halicarnassus around 20 B.C. to describe the writings of Herodotus.⁵ It was in this sense that the early churches adopted each of their rules, or laws, as canonical. It is this theological conception of the canon that has been the most influential, and thus deserves our initial attention.

The roots of the Christian canon lie in Judaism and the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.⁶ After this point, Judaism became a religion of the Book, and thus the Jewish canon of 39 Hebrew scriptures was fixed around the end of the first century.⁷ The set of Roman Catholic canonical texts contains 80 books, including what are known as the Apochrypha, and part of Luther's critique was about the sanctity of their canonicity. The origins of the Protestant Reformation were thus centred on textual criticism, and the eventual 'Protestant canon' contained 66 books, including the 39 books of the Judaic 'Old Testament' and the 27 books of the 'New Testament'. In the Roman Catholic Church, canon has been used to refer to church law, as well as to the individuals (*kanonikós*) who form and construct it. These individuals are then supposed to teach the canon to others. With the development of the Lutheran and Calvinist movements, these churches created their own canons, but in a looser sense, as did other later ecclesiastical movements. In common ecclesiastical usage, then, the canon came to refer more generally to the doctrine of the *specific* faith. More recently, the Bible, or in the Greek *Biblia* (little books), has been understood by some theological scholars

as itself an anthology, composed by a process of evaluation and selection.⁸ Since the 1980s, there has been significant growth in this field of scholarship, which has become known as *canonical criticism* and has drawn further attention to vagaries of canonicity.

The important point here, then, is that there is significant divergence even within the ecclesiastical understandings of canon, although they are linked by the notion of their relative fixity as a matter of doctrine. But it must be remembered that the Protestant revelation is

¹ F. Kermode, The argument about canons, in: F. McConnell (Ed), *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, New York and Oxford, 1986, 78-96, 78.

² T. Ingold, *Evolution and Social Life*, Cambridge, 1986, x-xi.

³ For example, see Newcomb's invocation of 'feasting' as central to the 'canons of this group of historical geographers' when discussing an early international meeting of the 'Commonwealth' group in 1983. R.M. Newcomb, CUKANZUS '83 at Oxford, *Journal of Historical Geography* 9 (1983) 396-401, 397.

⁴ D. Woodward, Preface, in: D. Woodward and G.M. Lewis (Eds), *The History of Cartography, Volume 2, Book 3: Cartography in Traditional African, American, Arctic, Australian, and Pacific Societies*, Chicago, 1998, xix-xxi, xix.

⁵ Herodotus was thus being deemed to provide the best available model, or canon, of Ionic historiography. See G.A. Kennedy, The origin of the concept of a canon and its application to the Greek and Latin classics, in: J. Gorak (Ed), *Canon Vs. Culture: Reflections on the Current Debate*, New York, 2001, 105-116.

⁶ In Islam, notions of canonicity are less significant, but have nevertheless been influential. See B.M. Wheeler, *Applying the Canon in Islam: The Authorization and Maintenance of Interpretative Reasoning in Hanafi Scholarship*, Albany, 1996. The recent debate surrounding the translation of the Library of Arabic Literature has attempted to deploy the term *corpus* rather than canon. See P.F. Kennedy, These books shouldn't just hide on a shelf, Library of Arabic Literature Blog, New York (9 July 2013), Available at:

more centrally textual in a way that the Catholic one is not. This problematizes ideas of the inherent *textuality* of the canonical. *Torah* refers to ‘authoritative tradition.’⁹ Ecclesiastical history derives from a tension between the history of the book and the history of its interpretative communities. In this sense, it is important to try to capture the *dialectical* relation between canon and tradition.¹⁰

This means that, as theologian Delwin Brown puts it, canons ‘are inherently polyphonic and plurivocal.’¹¹ Brown argues that the features of a canon are their boundedness, normativity, contestability, contemporaneity, curatorial character and existential nature. For our purposes, the final of these is the most important; the canon functions as a dimension of identity formation. Even in contemporary debates in theology, then, the notion of the canon has been stretched beyond a set of scripture: ‘Canons are complexes of myths, stories, rituals, doctrines, texts, or institutions; and usually they are combinations of these.’¹²

At this point, even the sympathetic historian of geography may ask: so what does this mean for the geographical canon? The important point here is that, even if we were to aspire <http://www.libraryofarabicliterature.org/2013/philip-kennedy-these-books-shouldnt-just-hide-on-a-shelf/>. Last accessed 25 March 2015.

⁷ F. Kermode, Canons, *London Review of Books*, Volume 6, Number 2 (1984) 3-4; F. Kermode, *Forms of Attention: Botticelli and Hamlet*, Chicago and London, 1985.

⁸ F. McConnell, Introduction, in: F. McConnell (Ed), *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, New York and Oxford, 1986, 3-18.

⁹ D. Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations: Tradition and Theological Construction*, Albany, 1994, 16.

¹⁰ Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations*.

¹¹ Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations*, 72.

¹² Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations*, 114.

after Kermode's 'true ecclesiastical' model for geography's canon, the choice would still be complicated.¹³ At root, there are competing conceptions of the canonical.

CANONS FOR WHOM?

Notwithstanding this discussion, my sense is that geographers might be more comfortable with ideas of a post-theological canon. Notions of a *secular* canon, in the sense of a list of approved authors that any educated individual ought to read, date from the mid-eighteenth century and the European Enlightenment. This was never articulated in the specific language of canonicity, but the parallels with modes of theological instruction are obvious. The distinguishing feature of the secular canon is its *permeability*. New works can be added and recovered, or old works neglected and excluded, to an extent not permitted in any non-secular variant.¹⁴

The earliest known application in English of the word 'canon' to secular works is the reference to 'the Platonic Canon' in the 1885 edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*.¹⁵ It seems that a particular variant of the secular model of canonicity, that is the canon as a group of endorsed practitioners, can be seen in development of the related concept of *disciplinarity* in the late nineteenth century. Higher education in Europe, since around the middle of the century, was beginning to relax some of its prescriptive, ecclesiastical requirements and become generally more secular. Each of these new disciplinary approaches, such as the sociological or anthropological, was attempting to identify and bound emergent, scholarly communities of practice. In doing so, advocates were trying to codify the best examples of past practice and the criteria for future membership. The later decades of the nineteenth

¹³ Kermode, *The argument about canons*, 78.

¹⁴ Kermode, *The argument about canons*.

¹⁵ Kennedy, *The origin of the concept of a canon*.

century were therefore critical in the decisions taken about canonicity across the disciplines. Canonicity was a matter of professional identity.

In literary studies, there has been perhaps the most extensive development of discussions of the canon. The contemporary resurgence of scholarly interest in canonicity is often dated to the ‘canon wars’ that engulfed Literature departments in the U.S. during the 1990s.¹⁶ There is, though, a longer history of debates over canonical composition in literary criticism. The Cambridge critic F.R. Leavis famously declared in 1948 that the only great English novelists were Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad. But in his *The Great Tradition*, Leavis used the language of ‘classics’ and ‘tradition’, rather than the vocabulary of canon. What Leavis did do, however, was to contribute significantly to the idea of the *canonisation* of ‘the truly great writers’ like Austen, rather than of particular books or texts.¹⁷ Charles Dickens is excluded from Leavis’s tradition precisely because only his *Hard Times* was deemed of note. For Leavis, one swallow does not a summer make. And this is an important characteristic of the literary canon that marks a continuation with the theological variant: ambivalence on the issue of its population. Is this to be through classic texts or great authors?

More widely, the influence of, and opposition to, Leavis’s attempts to create a ‘great tradition’ can be seen throughout English letters after 1945. Harold Bloom, the American critic of poetry, provided an influential psychoanalytic reading of ‘strong poets’ in the early 1970s.¹⁸ For Bloom, social and political biases could only permit the persistence of poets for a generation or two. After this, Bloom argued, ‘[p]oets survive because of their inherent

¹⁶ Although, as noted earlier, the influence of the ‘new canonical criticism’ in theology during the 1980s was an often unacknowledged, even unconscious, inspiration.

¹⁷ F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*, London, 1962[Originally published in 1948], 5.

strength; this strength is manifested through their influence on other strong poets.’¹⁹ Through this, only strong poets can become part of tradition. And this is Bloom’s ‘anxiety of influence’ – all writers desire to write with an originality that acts against tradition but also intends to form part of its future.

Bloom is important because, during the canon wars, he sought to provide the *definitive* list of the 26 writers that compose ‘the Western Canon’, including the likes of Shakespeare, Austen, Ibsen, Joyce and Kafka.²⁰ The central characteristic of a canonical work, for Bloom, is that of *strangeness*, or a form of originality that startles the reader into accepting its significance. Bloom’s argument is unapologetically elitist and disconcertingly nostalgic. His Western Canon is formed through selectivity by learned critics. His central point is that the literary canon needs to be understood ‘as the relation of an individual reader and writer to what has been preserved out of what has been written’, rather than as a ‘list of books for required study.’²¹ In this sense, it is more properly the ‘literary Art of Memory’ than the concern of ecclesiastics.²²

Notwithstanding Bloom’s value as a commentator, the politics of his version of canonicity are rather problematic. The central point of the ‘canon wars’, in reaction to the dominance of figures such as Bloom in the American academy, was that canonicity becomes a vehicle of ideology.²³ Although individual readers were supposedly empowered to select

¹⁸ H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, London, 1973, 5.

¹⁹ H. Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, New York, 1975, 200.

²⁰ H. Bloom, *The Western Canon: the Books and School of the Ages*, London and Basingstoke, 1994.

²¹ Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 17.

²² Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 17.

²³ W.E. Cain, Opening the American mind: reflections on the ‘canon’ controversy, in: J. Gorak (Ed), *Canon Vs. Culture: Reflections on the Current Debate*, New York, 2001, 3-16.

their canon in dialogue with tradition, inevitably the same sorts of authors and texts continued to populate it – Dead White European Males. As Valentine Cunningham argues, it was only with the introduction of ‘Theory’ to cultural criticism that an expansion of the literary canon was permitted.²⁴ This resulted in much critical commentary during the 1990s,²⁵ such that the idea that the literary canon evolves over time and space is now pretty much accepted. The geography of the canon is now well noted amongst such communities.²⁶

²⁴ V. Cunningham, *Reading After Theory*, Oxford, 2002, 44; V. Cunningham, *In the Reading Gaol: postmodernity, texts, and history*, Oxford, 1994.

²⁵ On exclusion in the literary canon, see J. Munns, Canon fodder: women’s studies and the (British) literary canon, in: J. Gorak (Ed), *Canon Vs. Culture: Reflections on the Current Debate*, New York, 2001, 17-27; S.L. Meek, The politics of poetics: creative writing programs and the double canon of contemporary poetry, in: J. Gorak (Ed), *Canon Vs. Culture: Reflections on the Current Debate*, New York, 2001, 81-102. On attempts at purposeful exclusion of readers by modernist writers, see J. Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939*, London and Boston, 1992. Walter Mignolo provides a decolonial reading of the literary canon, arguing for the alternative fertility of the idea of the corpus and the power relations involved in canonicity. See W.D. Mignolo, Canons a(nd)cross-cultural boundaries (or, whose canon are we talking about?), *Poetics Today* 12 (1991) 1-28; W.D. Mignolo, Second thoughts on canon and corpus, *Latin American Literary Review* 20(40) (1992) 66-69.

²⁶ It has long been discussed, for example, that the respective English language and literature courses at Oxford and Cambridge have contrasting definitions of the canonical poets, even ‘different canons’. The Cambridge English Faculty never thought it necessary to incorporate W.H. Auden into its canon, despite his election as Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1956. See N. Lezard, Poetry’s puzzles and their infuriating solutions, *The Guardian Review*, Saturday 20 April 2013, 19, 19; P. Hensher, ‘Whatever is, is right’, *The Guardian Review*, Saturday 21

In 2001, Frank Kermode returned to the debate to argue that canons, ultimately, are about pleasure, change and chance.²⁷ In doing so, Kermode implicitly defended the importance of *chance* against Bloom's more conservative notion of quality 'outing'. Things get left out or forgotten or are recovered and so the canon changes. Further, inspired by the Barthesian notion of *jouissance*, the key element of the canonical is *pleasure*.²⁸ As Kermode had it, changes in the canon can cause pleasure and also 'its potent derivative, dismay.'²⁹

These divergent understandings of the literary canon have been mirrored in debates about canonicity across the humanities and social sciences. In political theory, for example, the 'Cambridge School' of Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock attempted to provide a clear canon from Hobbes's *Leviathan* onwards.³⁰ In this way, the study of political theory could be distinguished from philosophy.³¹ In history more widely, certain figures, such as nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke, are viewed as providing canonical examples of historical writing.³² For the discipline of economics, it is debateable as to whether it has ever had a textual canon, notwithstanding the constant references to key individuals by commentators. Students of economics are neither required nor encouraged to read Adam Smith, never mind Thorstein Veblen. If anything, the central orthodoxy of neoclassical economics is mathematical modelling.³³ Certainly, much critique about the state of the contemporary discipline of economics bemoans its ontological narrowness.³⁴

There is thus divergence in the canonical models of other disciplines that geographers might look towards. This is reinforced if we turn to other social sciences. For anthropology, June 2014, 17.

²⁷ F. Kermode, *Pleasure and Change: the Aesthetics of Canon*, Oxford, 2004. Like his earlier interventions, Kermode's Tanner lectures remain surfeit with theological metaphor – conversion, benediction, apostasy, reformation.

²⁸ R. Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, Paris, 1973.

²⁹ Kermode, *Pleasure and Change*, 50.

there are supposedly two Trans-Atlantic canons. In British and, until recently, European Social Anthropology, the participant observation of Bronislaw Malinowski is understood as the canonical method of the theoretical school of functionalism. In North America, the dominant figure was Franz Boas, although he was only elevated to *canonical* status after 1945. Such accounts do, though, disguise considerable complexity. Once canonical figures, such as Margaret Mead, have now departed from the American canon. As Camilla Gibb puts it, '[i]f one anthropologist's name is known beyond the field, it is that of Margaret Mead, and yet in all my years of studying anthropology I was never taught her work.'³⁵ In a recent reflection on his classic history of British social anthropology, Adam Kuper outlines the regional and departmental factions that characterized that discipline during the interwar years.³⁶ Likewise, in his landmark statement on the need to 'bridge the divide' in anthropology, Tim Ingold aimed squarely at the overbearing 'normal canons' of his discipline.³⁷ His anthropological canon was to be reformed for future practice. All of this problematizes the notion of two canons for anthropology separated by the Atlantic Ocean.

Moreover, further variation exists in sociology, the discipline arguably closest of all to contemporary human geography. Most scholars of the human sciences can readily identify the sociological canon of Max Weber, Karl Marx and Émile Durkheim. The selection of this 'odd trinity', as Geoffrey Hawthorn terms them, marked the formation of a peculiarly *modernist* discipline by actors such as Talcott Parsons at interwar Harvard and Raymond Aron at the postwar Sorbonne.³⁸ Sociologists formed a narrow canon during the 1950s, and its members were selected to help underpin interests of the day, involving societal order and the formation of modernity. As Hawthorn puts it:

For its canon, therefore, sociology had a choice. It could include all canons, which would declare its ambition but risk its identity. Or it could be defiant, and recruit only from itself. In practice it has done the second.³⁹

Sociology's canon, therefore, continues to be taught to students as if its members are contemporaries rather than their antiquity.

On the contrary, 'the New Geography', as an emergent university subject in debates in the Royal Geographical Society and Oxford and Cambridge in the 1880s, ambitiously envisaged itself as 'the new Greats.'⁴⁰ As Mackinder concluded his agenda for a modern geography:

³⁰ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan, or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Common-wealth Ecclesiastical and Civil*, Oxford, 1996[Originally published in 1651]. Indeed, it might be argued that some of the recent popularity about a possible geographical canon has been inspired by the rapprochement between political theory and political geography as embodied, for example, in the work of Stuart Elden. Elden, trained as a political theorist at Brunel University but employed until recently as a political geographer, has reflected on the different languages of canonicity across these approaches. See S. Elden, Reading texts, the canon, and historical access, *Progressive Geographies Blog* (9 August 2010), Available at: <http://progressivegeographies.com/2010/08/09/reading-texts-the-canon-and-historical-access/>, Last accessed 26 March 2015; and S. Elden, Tom Conley reviews *The Birth of Territory in Imago Mundi*, *Progressive Geographies Blog* (2 June 2014), Available at: <http://progressivegeographies.com/2014/06/02/tom-conley-reviews-the-birth-of-territory-in-imago-mundi/>, Last accessed 26 March 2015.

³¹ Q. Skinner, Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas, *History and Theory* 8 (1969) 3-53.

³² On understandings of the canonical amongst historians, see M.S. Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820*, Princeton, N.J., 2000.

³³ This persists to such an extent that all forms of critique are lumped together as *heterodox* economics. See T. Lawson, The nature of heterodox economics. *Cambridge Journal of*

The world is changing, and it would seem that the classics are also becoming a specialty. Whether we regret the turn which things have taken or whether we rejoice at it, it is equally our duty to find a substitute. To me it seems that geography combines some of the requisite qualities.⁴¹

In doing so, it followed the opposite path to sociology with respect to canonicity, notwithstanding the new geographers' comparably modernist aspirations. The new geography's canon was the most ambitious of all, because it was to transcend the 'greats' of ancient and modern literature.⁴² As Mackinder noted himself, the 'inherent breadth and mansidedness' of this vision was both 'its chief merit' and 'render[ed] it "suspect" to an age of specialists'.⁴³ The new geography's approach to canonicity was thus resolutely antiquarian *at the very moment* of its modernism. In this sense, it may be unsurprising that the new geographers and their texts are not treated as canonical by geographers today. The important point, though, is to note the specific approach adopted to the constitution of geographical canon.

EXAMINING CANONICITY AND GEOGRAPHY

Ever since the late nineteenth century, there has been relatively little systematic discussion of canons in geography. This has meant that the non-existence of the geographical canon has been asserted on a relatively simplistic syllogism. Canons are about identity. Geography

Economics 30 (2006) 483-505; T. Lawson, What is this 'school' called neoclassical economics? *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 37 (2013) 947-983.

³⁴ On the post-1945 history of economics, see R.E. Backhouse, 'Economics', in: R.E. Backhouse and P. Fontaine (Eds), *The History of the Social Sciences since 1945*, Cambridge, 2010, 38-70; R.E. Backhouse and P. Fontaine, 'Contested identities: the history of Economics since 1945', in: R.E. Backhouse and P. Fontaine (Eds), *A Historiography of the Modern Social Sciences*, Cambridge, 2014, 183-210.

does not have a clear identity. Therefore, unsurprisingly, geography does not have a canon. Indeed, it is, for some, undeserving.⁴⁴

Given many conventions in the historiography of geography about the nature of the discipline, we might have always expected any geographical canon to be exceptional. This must not be understood as the, all too common, refrain of disconsolate geographers. Rather, there is simply no single model of canonicity that might be imported into historiographical discussions by geographers. There is no universal measure by which to adjudicate the geographical canon.

³⁵ C. Gibb, Review of *Euphoria* by Lily King, *The Guardian Review*, Saturday 27 December 2014, 10.

³⁶ A. Kuper, Anthropology and anthropologists forty years on, *Anthropology of this Century* 11 (2014), Available at: <http://aotcpres.com/articles/anthropology-anthropologists-forty-years/>, Last Accessed 9 September 2014.

³⁷ Ingold, *Evolution and Social Life*, xii, x. This is a seam that Ingold has continued to mine throughout his career. See T. Ingold and G. Palsson (Eds) *Biosocial Becomings: Integrating Social and Biological Anthropology*, Cambridge, 2013.

³⁸ G. Hawthorn, No contest, no history: the sociological canon, in: J. Gorak (Ed), *Canon Vs. Culture: Reflections on the Current Debate*, New York, 2001, 43-54, 46.

³⁹ Hawthorn, No contest, no history, 45-46.

⁴⁰ This was a pervasive influence upon ideas of geographical pedagogy, as Clive Barnett's eloquent elegy for the late David Stoddart demonstrates; C. Barnett, On Stoddart, 10 December 2014 – Available at <https://clivebarnett.wordpress.com/2014/12/10/on-stoddart/>, Last Accessed 6 January 2015.

⁴¹ H.J. Mackinder, On the Scope and Methods of Geography. *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography*, New Monthly Series, Vol.9, No.3, (1887) 141-160, 160.

Notwithstanding its relative silence on canonicity, geography has a comparably sophisticated sense of notions such as tradition and, to a lesser extent, paradigm. The idea of tradition in geography, as deployed so effectively by David Livingstone, is derived from Alasdair MacIntyre: tradition is ‘an historically extended, socially embodied argument.’⁴⁵ As intellectual historian Mark Phillips argues, much discussion of tradition across the disciplines has ignored other concepts, such as canonicity or discourse.⁴⁶ Disciplinary debate in geography about tradition has tended to coalesce around the presence or absence of the definite article. But as MacIntyre himself argued, ‘what constitutes a tradition is a conflict of interpretation of that tradition, a conflict which itself has a history susceptible of rival interpretations.’⁴⁷ The issue for the community of geographical practitioners is that we have developed a precise sensitivity to tradition without a corresponding interest in canon. In this sense, of the human sciences, geography is perhaps the most non-conformist.

The focus of this theme issue, then, is to discuss how and why the discipline of geography has dealt with the question of its canon and the resultant consequences and⁴² Indeed, consideration of Cardinal John Henry Newman’s idea of the university provides an instructive context for the emergence of this vision of Geography as the new Greats. See J.H. Newman, *The Idea of a University*, London, 1852.

⁴³ Mackinder, *On the Scope and Methods of Geography*, 159.

⁴⁵ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory*, Second Edition, London, 1985, 222.
D.N. Livingstone, *The Geographical Tradition: Episodes in the History of a Contested Enterprise*, Oxford, 1992.

⁴⁶ M.S. Phillips, What is Tradition when it is not ‘invented’? A historiographical introduction, in: M.S. Phillips and G. Schochet (Eds), *Questions of Tradition*, Toronto, 2004, 3-29. For another view of tradition, see M. Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, Toronto, 2002.

⁴⁷ A. MacIntyre, *The Tasks of Philosophy, Selected Essays, Volume 1*, Cambridge, 2006, 11.

implications. The openness of geography to new theoretical influences has been rightly praised for around 40 years, which has helped facilitate acceptance of the ‘moral obligation of the geographer.’⁴⁸ Perhaps less remarked upon though is that it has also allowed the history of geography to flourish as an intellectual field. It seems that it is precisely the partiality and openness of geography’s canon that has allowed for a comparative richness of tradition.

The exceptionality of the discipline is such that we can note that geography’s may be a more-than-the-book canon that includes maps, landscapes and practices. And it would not be alone in this. In art history, the canon includes objects as much as (written) texts.⁴⁹ Likewise, geographers certainly enjoy *practices of canonisation* as much as, perhaps even more than, any other discipline.⁵⁰ We award prizes and medals. We organize ‘Author meets Critics (Interlocutors)’ sessions at major conferences and meetings. We produce special issues and the occasional *Festschrift* devoted to an individual’s oeuvre. There has always been a healthy interest in biographies of geographers, with dedicated publications such as *Geographers: Biobibliographical Studies*, compendia of *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*, and designated ‘Classics’ and ‘Textbooks that Moved Generations’ in *Progress in Human Geography* and *Progress in Physical Geography*. Recent collections have even mentioned the canon in attempts to provide overviews of the disciplinary field.⁵¹ Moreover, we can think of many departments where the influence of a Canon, in the most dominant sense, was

⁴⁴ R.C. Powell, Echoes of the New Geography? History and philosophy of geography I, *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (2012) 518-526.

⁴⁸ D. Harvey, What kind of geography for what kind of public policy, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 63 (1974) 18-24, 24.

critical, such as the Aberystwyth School under H.J. Fleure, the Berkeley School under C.O. Sauer or the Cambridge School of Historical Geography under H.C. Darby.

To conservative historians of geography, there might be the impression that recent concerns with canons and canonicity have seemingly suddenly (re)emerged. This is simply not the case. First, there has been a gradual growth of interest in texts and practices in history of geography for around 30 years. Second, these themes, if not explicit, can certainly be traced in work over the past decade by historians of geography, who have increasingly adopted biography and the study of particular ‘canonical geographers’ to investigate broader conceptual and theoretical themes.⁵² Third, the interest in geography’s canon was resurgent after 2009, with its Darwin anniversaries and the debates at the RGS about exploration.⁵³ For example, the cantankerous debate sparked by Noel Castree’s claim in *Environment and Planning A* that Marx and Darwin were the only geographical thinkers of note was an attempt at canon-formation, even if it was not explicitly intended as such.⁵⁴

At the same time, many readers will be aware that there have been periodic debates in the history and philosophy of geography about canonicity, whether framed as such or not. In the 1980s and 1990s, the historiography of geography began to investigate the dominance of specific traditions of practice, influenced by important texts such as Livingstone’s or David Stoddart’s *On geography and its history*.⁵⁵ There have been recurrent discussions, such as that convened by Felix Driver in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* in 2007.

⁵⁰ R.C. Powell, Questions on the canon?, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2 (2012) 338-340.

⁵¹ See, for example, D. Gregory and N. Castree, Editors’ Introduction, in: D. Gregory and N. Castree (Eds), *Human Geography, Volume I*, London, 2012, xxv-ixxix; J.A Agnew and D.N. Livingstone, Introduction, in: J.A Agnew and D.N. Livingstone (Eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Geographical Knowledge*, London, 2011, 1-17.

1995,⁵⁶ or, more recently, the forum in *Dialogues in Human Geography* on the essay by Innes Keighren, Christian Abrahamsson and Veronica della Dora.⁵⁷ Such discourse has been very important in raising issues around the persistent gendering of canonical practices, competing national linguistic traditions, and the need for further translation of major texts and continuing skill development in foreign languages.

The eight essays here complement and support these efforts, but they also attempt to take a different approach by presenting substantive, research-based arguments, rather than shorter, colourful polemics. This special issue emerged from a workshop, ‘The Geographical Canon?’, held on 15 June 2012 at St. Catherine’s College, Oxford and sponsored by the History and Philosophy of Geography Research Group (HPGRG) and the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers). The idea for the workshop emerged from ongoing conversations over a number of years between a number of the workshop speakers and the wider membership of the HPGRG.⁵⁸ We present here full papers from a range of leading voices in the field and emerging scholars, located across a range of

⁵² N. Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 2003; G. Kearns, *Geopolitics and Empire: The Legacy of Halford Mackinder*, Oxford, 2009; I.M. Keighren, *Bringing Geography to Book: Ellen Semple and the Reception of Geographical Knowledge*, London and New York, 2010; S. Elden and E. Mendieta (Eds) *Reading Kant's Geography*, Albany, 2011.

⁵³ Powell, *Echoes of the New Geography?*.

⁵⁴ N. Castree, Commentary: Charles Darwin and the geographers, *Environment and Planning A* 41 (2009) 2293–2298. See the virulent responses by, among others, F. Driver, Commentary: Charles Darwin and the geographers: unnatural selection, *Environment and Planning A* 42 (2010) 1–4; D. Finnegan, Commentary: Darwin, dead and buried? *Environment and Planning A* 42 (2010) 259–261; and D. Dorling, Commentary: The Darwins and the Cecils are only empty vessels, *Environment and Planning A* 42 (2010) 1023–1025.

geographical institutions. Each scholar has taken a particular text, body of published material or set of concepts, and has used this to reflect upon ideas of a geographical canon and canonicity. The issue is concluded by a characteristically thought-provoking Afterword by Trevor Barnes.

As is evident across the disciplines, discussions about canonicity are often increased by anxiety over pedagogy. Certainly, discomfort about the teaching of history and

⁵⁵ D.R Stoddart, *On Geography and its History*, Oxford, 1986.

⁵⁶ F. Driver, Geographical traditions: rethinking the history of geography, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* N.S. 20 (1995) 403-404; D. Matless, Effects of history, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* N.S. 20 (1995) 405-409; F. Driver, Submerged identities: familiar and unfamiliar histories, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* N.S. 20 (1995) 410-413; G. Rose, Tradition and paternity: same difference?, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* N.S. 20 (1995) 414-416; C. Barnett, Awakening the dead: who needs the history of geography?, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* N.S. 20 (1995) 417-419; D.N. Livingstone, Geographical traditions, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* N.S. 20 (1995) 420-422.

⁵⁷ I.M. Keighren, C. Abrahamsson and V. della Dora, On canonical geographies, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2 (2012) 296-312; Powell, Questions on the canon?; R.J. Mayhew, On canons, cannons and the rapier, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2 (2012) 313-316; C.W.J. Withers, Geography's evolving traditions and textual critique, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2 (2012) 317-320; J. Agnew, Of canons and fanons, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2 (2012) 321-323; A. Maddrell, Treasuring classic texts, engagement and the gender gap in the geographical canon, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2 (2012) 324-327; J. Monk, Canons, classics, and inclusion in the histories of geography, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2 (2012) 328-331; P. Hubbard, The return of the living dead, *Dialogues in*

philosophy of geography has recently been noted.⁵⁹ It may well be overly prescriptive to proscribe a set of canonical texts or thinkers for our, or any other, discipline. However, there may be pedagogical virtue in the experience of compulsion during canonical engagement – a point made by Auden in his Inaugural Lecture as Professor of Poetry.⁶⁰ Notwithstanding an encounter with canonicity, geographers would still value the plural and contested enterprise that characterises the contemporary discipline. Yet very few novice geographers – exactly the sorts of individuals who are conventionally asked to teach the history of philosophy of geography after appointment – know anything much about the history of the discipline, never mind its canonicity. An aim of the current papers, therefore, is also to provide some research-led materials to enhance teaching in these areas.

Human Geography 2 (2012) 332-334; R.H. Schein, Locating contradictions in canonical geographies, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2 (2012) 335-337; I.M. Keighren, C. Abrahamsson and V. della Dora, We have never been canonical, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2 (2012) 341-345.

⁵⁸ HPGRG provided bursaries to facilitate attendance by postgraduates at the workshop. Of the original presenters in June 2012, all have contributed papers here, with the exception of Innes Keighren. Other contributors attended on the day and have developed a contribution over the intervening months.

⁵⁹ F. Driver, Research in historical geography and in the history and philosophy of geography in the UK, 2001-2011: an overview, *Journal of Historical Geography* 42 (2013) 203-211.

⁶⁰ G. Watson, The war of the canon, *Times Higher Education*, 16 July 2009, Available at: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/the-war-of-the-canon/407368.article>, Last accessed 15 September 2014.

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The collection commences with Robert Mayhew's paper, which examines the *longue durée* of canon formation in geography. By attending to the formulation of accounts of the geographies of the 'long' eighteenth century, Mayhew shows how the institutionalisation of Anglo-American geography after 1870 has constructed a relatively stable, but always mutating, canon. Mayhew demonstrates persuasively that, at its most minimal, scholars were actively involved in canon formation in certain times and places during geography's history. This should concern us today, Mayhew argues, as the ability to participate in the definitions of the pedagogical practices of one's community remains central to a humanist, and humane, education.

In examining the construction of Franz Boas's 1887 agenda for the 'Study of Geography', Richard Powell revisits a key moment in the intellectual delineation of the boundaries between anthropology and geography. The ways in which Boas has been read and remembered across different scholarly communities speaks directly to arguments about geography's canon. By considering Boas's early fieldwork with the Inuit of Cumberland Sound, Powell argues for more careful attention to practices of remembering, forgetting and canonicity in geography.

Avril Maddrell shows us that across geography, or any other given discipline, the practices of gendering the canon are stark. Drawing attention to a number of texts, Maddrell shows that gender remains at the heart of the debate over the canon or, in her preferred nomenclature, the classic. Drawing attention to exclusion along different lines, Matthew Farish considers the ways in which military geographies of experiment, exercise and violence have been positioned as non-canonical. Military geography, although often neglected within conventional disciplinary histories, becomes for Farish the critical site through which geographical knowledges influenced the Cold War world.

Focusing on Anglophone human geography, Ron Johnston and James Sidaway's paper argues that a disciplinary canon no longer exists. Before about 1960, they argue, British geographical pedagogy did focus on the reading of canonical geographers in the original German and French. Although Johnston and Sidaway concede that it might still be possible to argue for smaller sub-disciplinary canons, for them the discipline now more closely focuses on canonical *concepts* – space, place, environment, and scale. Taking an even narrower focus on geographical education in English schools, Jo Norcup investigates the process of canon formation in ephemeral publications and literature. Examining the history of the journal *Contemporary Issues in Geography and Education* during the 1980s, Norcup shows how materials, objects and actors work together in the making and unmaking of geography's canon.

Dealing with the Russian geographical canon, the paper by Jon Oldfield and Denis Shaw broadens the debate away from an exclusively Anglo-American focus on canonicity.⁶¹ Oldfield and Shaw stress the importance of the history of Russian imperial exploration and geographical survey, begun under Peter the Great, in forming Russian geography. From the nineteenth century, the German textual tradition of geography began to intersect with a particular Russian environmental approach associated with soil scientist V.V. Dokuchaev. The Russian and Soviet case, therefore, provide further resources for consideration of canon formation in geography beyond traditions in Western Europe and North America.

Andrew Barry's paper uses Quentin Skinner's approach to the history of political thought to sketch out a theory of the geographical canon. Inspired by Gilles Deleuze, Felix⁶¹ We solicited an essay on ideas of the 'canon' in physical geography, but potential authors were unable to deliver. This, in itself, provides an insight into how physical geographers think about canons, histories and practices. In short, though, it is obvious that debates in physical geography about scale, process, systems and environmental change would provide much of value for consideration by future historians of the canon.

Guattari and Isabelle Stengers, Barry sees the task for geographers as being the construction of voices of minority through the language of the surrounding social and natural sciences. In some ways reminiscent of Cindy Katz's call for 'minor theory,'⁶² Barry proposes that geography is best seen as a *minor discipline* and, thus, that it needs to valorise a *necessarily* partial canon.

As Kermode puts it, '[t]here was a time when discussion of canons was angry but simple.'⁶³ Discussions were about who was great, and not about the epistemic violence of proclaiming and attributing greatness. When debating the geographical canon today, it is better to place it within the wider concerns about the future of a particular vision of the university and higher education. The necessity for this may be seen upon consideration of the future of the humanities and social sciences, and, indeed, of universities and higher education more broadly, as that world is reorganised towards the languages of skills, impact, and relevance.⁶⁴ A concern for reading, teaching and sharing must remain part of the geographical tradition, and this will require renewed engagement with the canon. Canons are a personal choice but there is virtue and pleasure in contributing, collectively, to their construction and constitution. For geographers to distrust canon formation is a welcome trope of an anti-canonical discipline. To claim we never need to reflect on the canon seems, in the current intellectual climate, rather short-sighted.

⁶² C. Katz, Towards minor theory, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14 (1996) 487-499.

⁶³ Kermode, *Pleasure and Change*, 15.

⁶⁴ S. Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, London, 2012; J.D. Brewer, *The Public Value of the Social Sciences: An Interpretative Essay*, London, 2013; H. Small, *The Value of the Humanities*, Oxford, 2013.