Geographers – looking back to lead the way?

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Introduction
The history of geography in Australia is well known and much discussed but relatively little attention has been given to how geographical thought has influenced the teaching and research of local geographers. This absence of an understanding of the impact of geographical thought, and inattention to its origins means that today’s student geographers may have little understanding of the genesis of their craft, and why their learning follows a unique trajectory. This paper considers the emergence of geographical thought globally and its expression in Australia, and especially in South Australia. It argues that there is a need to understand and continue to build on past experiences and acknowledge previous geographical concepts, before concluding that knowledge of this past experience would add strength and deeper understanding of the challenges of the future.

A special edition of this journal published in 2004 reviewed the teaching and scholarship of geography in Australia and South Australian universities in particular. Part of the debate that was ongoing at that time concerned where geography was first taught and who were the leaders in the teaching field (Harvey 2004). While the protagonists appear to have come to an uneasy resolution of the conflict, and a measure of agreement, it is clear that the genesis of geography teaching, learning and research is difficult, if not impossible, to determine, and perhaps we need to accept that while the profession may not have been formalised until such august organisations as the Royal Geographical Society within a number of Australian states, the geographic sections of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS), and then the Institute of Australian Geographers were established, geographers have been at the forefront of colonisation, the subsequent settlement and adaptation of that settlement. The research into, and recording of, the process of settlement and change has also fallen to geographers, either those who formerly label themselves as geographers or those who write of geographic phenomena.

In the English speaking world in historical terms geographers have been prolific writers. Many of the earliest non religious books available to readers were written by geographers, although they may not have been identified in that way. For example, in 1607 Camden published Britannia, and this was recently portrayed in a BBC programme and shown on ABC television (Crane 2010). Camden undertook a survey of Britain and identified proposed routes for those travelling across Britain. Such publications described topography, the people who lived in particular areas, specific locations and their uses, developments within areas and possible challenges which travellers might encounter. Semi religious tales told of the travels of ordinary people to iconic centres. The Canterbury Tales, for example, exemplify such an approach, while Shakespeare set many of his plays in various real and imagined geographic locations bringing to the reader an often unimaginable world. Similarly as education spread throughout all levels of society both fiction and non fiction material emerged with a range of implicit and explicit geographical
backgrounds. Classical children's literature for example frequently featured imagined locations and quasi geographic titles; hence *Treasure Island*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Alice in Wonderland*, the *Voyages of Doctor Dolittle*, brought geography into the lives of many, but not in a formal way.

Early geographic writing was frequently based on maps made for those engaged in war activities, the Crusades, exploration, colonisation, and later settlement. Maps were a critical resource. Captain's logs and reports from travellers to their sponsors led to many publications during the 17th and 18th Centuries, perhaps the best known of which in the English speaking world could be considered to be Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, a book grounded in geographic knowledge, and observation and interpretation of primary data. Similarly the publication of Cook's diaries excited a generation eager to hear and read about the exploration of the new world and this has continued with Beaglehole's extensive works on Cook and Banks, followed by Moorehead's exploration (1966) into the changes that discovery and colonisation imposed on the lives of the Indigenous people who Cook 'discovered'. The last two hundred years have seen a wide growth in publications and the formalisation of approaches to geographical interpretation and geographical thought. Authors of seminal works have not necessarily started out as geographers and, in fact, the term 'geographer' has been subject to change and redefinition over time. Geographic schools of thought have developed in different continents and Universities within each continent. As a consequence of this variation there is no one 'father' of the discipline. In addition, there is no one formal approach to the analyses of the topic or its content.

The challenge of identifying geographic writing and geographic tradition has been widely discussed. Within the English speaking world there has been a series of attempts to formerly name the various approaches undertaken by those who would regard themselves as geographers and these approaches have been adopted by large numbers of geographers for often relatively short periods of time. Consequently authors such as Peter Haget and David Livingstone have described the change from the study of physiography, to environmental determinism, to regionalism, through the quantitative revolution and on to post colonialism with all the challenges this presented. In his paper on Donald Meinig, Bigelow (2009) comments that Meinig had seen the need for a literature that interpreted the patterns of change, and that these might vary by author. As such he noted 'The geographer can be an artist, not a scientist'. Bigelow went on to discuss Meinig's major contribution – the historical imperative in human geography stressing the importance of understanding the role of all actions in impacting on the current environment (p. 309). Certainly the role of historical geography has changed considerably, such that it is now rarely studied as a discrete part of the discipline and only rarely implicitly within other areas of geographic study. And yet without some understanding of the geography of past land use, settlement and the movement of physical and cultural frontiers it is hard to comprehend the patterns of today.

Within Australia, and Adelaide in particular, there have been many important geographers, particularly historical geographers and those who have focussed on the changes wrought by European colonisation on the country. White settlement in
Australia brought with it the need for an understanding of the new environment, the capacity of the land for successful colonisation on a scale different from that which had developed in other continents, the careful planning of cities and towns, transport routes and links with the rest of the world. Along with the need to understand the physical world came a need to evolve politically, to deal with a misunderstood Indigenous population, and even to understand perhaps the most basic geographic fact; that of living in a different hemisphere from that which most settlers had come from.

The late 19th and early 20th Century saw the emergence of many new social and educational structures within Australia. In Adelaide the establishment of schools and then Adelaide University led to the development of the teaching profession. Consequently, a cohort of professionals emerged as educationalists and leaders. There was early acknowledgement of the need to understand the local environment. Exploration of the interior of Australia and the possible population numbers and settlement patterns which the country could support were debated in many fora and this led inevitably to many publications about the country, its people and its future. Geography was taught in schools, but it was taught using British based texts, totally unsuited to the local environment and its characteristics. The early 20th Century therefore saw the emergence of locally born and trained professionals with a primary interest in local geography and the future of Australia as an independent country, within the British Empire. In addition to those trained in Adelaide there were many who came to Australia to research and teach. They focussed on the unique local environment in which they found themselves, and also applied their geographic knowledge to the international arena, becoming recognised both in Australia and overseas for their endeavours. As the American geographer Donald Meinig commented

*I suppose my whole writing career could be seen as a geographer’s version of the search for the self – of who one is, and how that came to be, and what is the meaning of it all. For the geographer that means close attention to where one is, what that place is like, and what the summation of the localities of life might reveal. Thus the geographer began his search on his native ground, expanded into the next larger encompassing region, and on and on through successively larger contexts for an understanding of his whole country…*

Thus the geographers who consider colonisation and the impact of colonial settlement on local environments, need to understand more than the present pattern of that settlement, but also how it came about and what led to the changes seen in today’s landscapes.

This paper traces the history of a few of these remarkable scholars, identifying the role each played in the growth of geographic knowledge in particular their focus on the broad environment and how the people of South Australia (mainly) have adapted to that environment. It cannot cover the achievements of all geographers, nor all the achievements of those discussed. By necessity many geographers with only tenuous links to South Australia, but whose work is of considerable influence, are excluded from this discussion though their importance to the discipline and influence on those
discussed is tacitly acknowledged and much appreciated. There are also many non-academic geographers whose role is equally important. Chronologically the discussion commences with the work of Sir Archibald Grenfell Price and Charles Fenner, and considers how, up to the present time, local geographers continue to research and contribute to increased understanding of the environmental problems South Australians face today. Les Heathcote’s role within this is discussed further in this issue in the paper by Heathcote and Maude.

The Geographers

In the colonial setting and following federation in Australia geography was dominated by the colonial tradition and the understanding of the environment as taught through British text books. The focus was on the physical size of the individual countries and what each produced and how much they exported, mainly to the UK or one of its other colonies. Little was understood of the unique environment of Australia or South Australia in particular. Much has now been written (e.g. Heathcote 1975, 1994; Jeans 1977; Powell 1988) of the early period of settlement, but in the early 20th Century there was a dearth of books which specifically focussed on the geography of Australia and its resources. As noted above much of what was written was not by or for geographers, or those studying human environmental relationships.

Archibald Grenfell Price was born in Adelaide and educated at St Peter College before studying at Oxford where he achieved a Masters degree and a teaching qualification. He was qualified to teach history but when employed at Sherborne College was also required to take classes in geography. On returning to teach at St Peters he was appalled at the material available to him to teach geography to students and wrote his first geography book specifically to enable local students to understand Australia and its place in the world, though this book, first published in 1918 had a distinctly colonial approach in the way it was structured and focussed. He emphasised the need for the book noting in a recorded interview held in the National Library of Australia;

When I came out to Australia [after completing his Masters at Oxford], I found that geography was in a very bad state. We were still using English textbooks. I can go through the capes of England or the tributaries of the Yorkshire Ouse, which I had motored over and never noticed – and that’s what we poor wretched Australians were taught. So I wrote a book called ‘Causal Geography’ which even the publisher called ‘Casual Geography’, which tried to set out the relations, how geography in Australia depends on climate and soil and all sorts of things like that, and the book was a success, and it ran into nine editions. Then I did, from the same point of view, the geography of South Australia and then I discovered that there were one or two very bad mistakes in the geography of South Australia, mistakes in early Australian history, so I thought I’d better write some history of South Australia, and that’s how I settled down and wrote ‘The Foundation and Settlement of South Australia’, ‘Pioneers of South Australia’ and ‘The History and Problems of the Northern Territory’. And that really was the beginning of it all.

While Price’s initial training was as an historian, in the 150 State Anniversary commemorative plaques on North Terrace Adelaide, he is remarkable as being the only geographer listed, though there are many explorers and pastoralists etc, so it
could rightly be claimed that he is perhaps Adelaide’s first ‘home grown’ geographer. As a consequence his interests were primarily in the first white settlers and their use of the land; in fact many of his early publications were historical in nature and identified the initial settlers he saw as of most influence within the colony of South Australia. He did however go on to write much more widely and about geographic influences on settlement, particularly in tropical regions, as well as being involved in a wide range of other research areas. Gale (2004) cites Kerr’s 1983 description of how Price intervened to ensure geography was maintained as a subject in its own right at the University, perhaps not only ensuring the understanding of the impact of settlement on the environment, but also the continuing publication of his own book which ran to at least eight reprints.

Gale (2004) identifies a number of other early books also being used to teach geography at Adelaide University. In the main this was as a part of other courses, specifically the Advanced Commercial certificate (p. 27) however commercial geography was not concerned with the impact of people on the environment, and change following colonisation, but on the relationships between industry and commerce.

A contemporary of Price, Charles Fenner also came to geography via a circuitous route of education and training in technical schools, but his geographical influence was significant. He wrote a number of geographic papers about South Australia and settlement before publishing South Australia – A Geographical Study Regional and Human in 1931. This was followed by his Geography of South Australia (1934) specifically for use in secondary schools (Fenner nd in Gale 2004). His further influence was similar to Price with links with the Royal Geographical Society, the naming of monuments and its historical committee. Fenner was particularly concerned that university education should be both scientific and stimulating for the students and field studies, which included analysis of change of land use and population change.

While Fenner and Price spent a considerable period of their lives in South Australia and the state was central to most of their studies of human environment relationships, outside South Australia but with influence on the state was the work of the remarkable Griffith Taylor who was very influential at the same period as Price and Fenner. Griffith Taylor’s legacy has been particularly well documented, (Strange and Bashford 2008) and his arguments concerning the carrying capacity of Australia, and whether settlement in some areas of Australia was possible even with adaption, led to much discussion in South Australia and elsewhere. These arguments are not repeated here, but as he has also been cited as Australia’s first professional full time geographer it seems appropriate to consider his influence in some areas in particular. The links Griffith Taylor made between climate, land and carrying capacity challenged the opinions of many of his contemporaries, and even some of today’s thinkers, that Australia was a place of unlimited capacity with regard to population and development. His perception of the environment and its ability to be peopled led to considerable public debate and his subsequent departure from Australia. However his ideas and the need to continue to understand the environment, and manage its fragility and diversity surely stimulated another group of South Australian researchers.
in the field of demography. Charles Price, son of Sir Archibald, was a leader in this field, though spending most of his professional career at the ANU. This geographical sub discipline was however further developed in Adelaide by the internationally renowned demographer, Graeme Hugo, in his work at both Flinders and Adelaide Universities.

Donald Meinig is probably best known in South Australia for his publication *On the Margins of the Good Earth*, which is a model of human environment relationships. He was however influenced by many non geographers, as well as geographers such as Halford Mackinder. A discussion of these intellectual influences (Bigelow 2009) shows philosophers, historians and anthropologists to be of great significance in the formation of Meinig’s approach to his research, and indeed in formulating the ideas he presented in his publications concerning colonisation and the impact of settlement. Meinig comments in the preface to *On the Margins of the Good Earth*

> this study is neither a history nor a geography… but an historical inquiry into certain features of geographical interest… it attempts to relate some portions of that history, to map some of the basic patterns which were developed and to examine with some care selected features in the colonization process.

Meinig spent a year at Adelaide University (1958) as a Fulbright Research Scholar. Prior to this time he had established his reputation in the United States as a researcher and teacher, in particular on the historical and cultural geography of the marginal lands of the American West. In a similar way to the way Price had lamented the books available to teachers, Meinig found that books available to him did not fit his needs as they lacked sufficient detail of local history and in his case appreciation of the cultural distinctions within the environment in which he taught (Bigelow 2009, p. 309).

In the Introduction to the Charles Homer Haskin Lecture for 1992 which Meinig presented – the first geographer to be invited to do so – it is noted that ‘the lecture is an unusually powerful one because it so intricately and powerfully links Meinig’s personal development with the evolution of his unique scholarly vision. Like Meinig’s life itself, the lecture is animated by a powerful sense of place and the particularity of place…the distillation of an unusually distinctive and distinguished career…’ Meinig’s work in South Australia focused on the extension and subsequent retraction of the wheat belt north of Adelaide. His thesis investigated the relationships of the settlers with their environment and the changes they created within that environment, some successfully and some with disastrous consequences. Meinig’s lecture gives a useful overview of the theme which dominates his and other researcher’s work, the interaction of people with their environment, and the consequent changes to that environment.

The environmental impact theme was developed further by another eminent researcher and author Michael Williams. Clout (2010, p. 111) recalled that Williams is particularly ‘remembered for his work in historical geography and environmental history, which ranged in scale from the regional to the global’. This recurring theme is reflected in the work of all those discussed here. As with many of the geographers
who have influenced environmental understanding in South Australia, Michael Williams was from Britain but spent a considerable period of his working life, 17 years, in Adelaide. His main contribution to the understanding of the evolution of settled white South Australia was *The Making of the South Australian Landscape*, published in 1976. This work reflected his meticulous fieldwork and analysis and many of the methods he used were replicated or extended by Les Heathcote in his work on drought and its impacts and also in his book *Australia*. In the preface of Williams’ book the author states

*I am conscious as a geographer, of one thing – all I see has either been created or changed in some way since the onset of European settlement…. One cannot understand the landscape of the present without going back to the history that lies behind it.…*

This fundamental need to understand the actions of the past settlers in order to interpret the present status of the environment is a continuing message. However Meinig went further than this. In his 1992 address he was determined that understanding this was not enough, he considered that those who understood the past and its effect on the present needed to encourage what he referred to as the ‘urgent problems of home repair and of remodelling the way we live’.

To encourage this remodelling, leaders in geographic education needed to look at the broader implications of what was and continues to happen within the environment in which we exist. In South Australia these leaders in academic geography have headed the various departments or schools of Geography within South Australia’s three tertiary institutions. A summary of the way geography evolved in each of these is included in the *South Australian Geographical Journal* 2004 and so not repeated here; in particular Smailes and Griffin (2004) analysed the trajectory of academic Geography and the researchers involved in their paper Geography at the University of Adelaide 1960–1991. This showed that during this period frequent staff and organisational changes led to fewer researchers who focussed on the links between early colonisation and current settlement patterns. Similarly Maude (2004) gave an over view of the development and continuation of Geography at Flinders University from its foundation in 1966 until 2003. However it is important here to identify the continuing evolution of the discipline and show how the themes identified above have continued under the guardianship of good leaders.

Murray McCaskill, the Foundation Professor of Geography at Flinders University had studied under Lawton in Canterbury. He had a long standing interest in all aspects of geography but an emphasis on both historical geography and the impact of humans on their environment. McCaskill’s approach to his analysis is outlined in a paper published in 2006 by the *South Australian Geographical Journal* where he identified the importance of a systematic approach to understanding the changes in the environment. He identified his ‘schema’ for a geographical approach as looking first at those he termed the discoverers and recorders, then the makers of geography on the ground, from pre-colonial to modern times, and then the interpreters of those patterns. A fourth element was the consumers, who use the knowledge and discoveries, but in many cases influenced future actions.
This approach was adopted in one of the most important publications he produced which was co-authored with another geographer Trevor Griffin for the State's 150th Anniversary. The Atlas of South Australia did more than simply supply a series of maps. It charted the known history of South Australia by taking what the editors described as an unconventional approach (Griffin and McCaskill 1986), to presenting the changes which had occurred within the state. The methodology focussed not on the physical geography of South Australia, as many previous atlases had done, but on the impact of colonisation, changes in land tenure and settlement, and the adaptation of people to those changes. The importance of understanding the natural environment and the hazards often related with that environment were also important. Reviewers of this publication (Duncan 1988; Rich 1988) remarked on the clarity with which the changes in the landscape had been presented, and Rich in particular noted the book was a ‘visual feast’ containing as it does not only illustrations created specifically for the atlas but also contemporary sketches of historical events. Such use strengthened the reader’s ability to interpret environmental change and thus reinforce the importance of the fourth element of McCaskill’s schema – to be a consumer of the knowledge presented.

Professor McCaskill’s research both before his tenure at Flinders and during it, strongly reflected the themes of colonisation and change. As Fraser (1999) summarised, the way McCaskill approached the theme of colonial adaptation to a new environment in all of the research work he undertook began with his PhD thesis when he investigated settlement in the western region of New Zealand. As illustrated above he continued to draw together the threads that linked colonisation of new countries, adaptation to the landscapes, and understanding the challenges of successful settlement. Fundamental to all of this work was the acknowledgement of environmental perception and the way people needed to understand the resources available to them. As a leader in understanding geography in South Australia he also understood that the people he worked with were a resource and strengthened the comprehension of geography not just in the research and publication area but also in the insistence that geography was integral to learning at secondary level, a role currently being carried out by Alaric Maude as the new national curriculum in geography is developed.

A very different approach to studying the changes wrought on South Australia by the colonisers was that taken by Fay Gale. Interestingly Fay provides a link between the first Geographer discussed above, Grenfell Price, and many current concerns being studied by today’s geographers. Fay was unique in many ways. She was the first Honours graduate in Geography at Adelaide University, and her subsequent research was strongly focussed on the way Aboriginal culture changed as a result of white settlement. Her PhD – A study of assimilation: Part Aborigines in South Australia – was supervised by Grenfell Price, and she went on to become a renowned teacher and researcher (see for example Anderson 2008; University World News 2008; Wundersitz and Anderson 2008). Anderson in particular notes that Gale ‘provoked in many of her students an impulse to question the self-proclaimed superiority of colonial thought and rule in Australia…Her work dwelt at the intersections of the physical and human worlds.’ and implicitly on the subsequent changes to those worlds. Gale’s leadership in Geography led her not only to becoming the first female
Professor at The University of Adelaide, but then the first Pro-Vice Chancellor at the same institution. Her professional firsts are many but she continued to explore the nexus between the effects of colonisation and the Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia and the changes to the environment throughout her career.

This paper began by outlining the work of accidental geographers who encouraged others to consider how actions taken in the past were influencing current environmental actions. This volume is dedicated to Les Heathcote, and while Les may have considered himself an historical geographer, his insight was not limited to describing what had occurred in the past. He investigated and understood the role of environmental perception, the way people had reacted to what they saw in the environment. The Meinig model of ten interpretations of one scene became clear when Heathcote considered how indigenous people, colonisers and settlers, and then the descendents of those colonisers interpreted the landscapes before them. Similarly in his research, writing and teaching Les adopted Meinig's approach (Bigelow 2009, p. 308) and used the familiar geographer's tools, maps and diagrams, but also historical art and historical photographs to fully illustrate the changes that were changing the landscape. Hence in his book *Australia* he was able to discuss concisely but accurately and in great detail the impact of initial white contact, the belief by the colonists that they could spread across Australia and inhabit its core, and the rebuttal from the environment that was suffered as misunderstood natural hazards changed any prospect of success. The study of natural hazards, in particular drought and its consequences (Heathcote 1983), is integral in an understanding of settlement adaptation. Recent events in Australia, including fires and floods show the need to live with an understanding of the environment. Many of the earlier geographers, particularly those of the environmental determinist school, had a belief that not only was there a necessity to understand the environment, but that the environment limited population and its activities. There are certainly aspects of environmental determinism in the work of Grenfell Price and Griffith Taylor, nevertheless while Heathcote’s recording of natural hazards and his interest in this area of geography led to greater international recognition, his work in this area was strongly designed to bring about greater awareness of how humans could adapt successfully, and work with environmental change, rather than retreat under its pressures.

The Future?
There are also important links to be drawn between the work of all the authors discussed here and the fourth element of McCaskill’s schema – the consumers. Authors such as Price and Fenner wrote books specifically for school and university students. Price in particular also had a great deal of influence on the wider community in his extraordinarily varied roles as teacher, researcher, preacher, MP, protagonist for public libraries, and leader of numerous committees including the Emergency Committee, which certainly ensured there were consumers for his work. Do today’s geographers have the same influence as those of the past? In his Preface to the second edition of *Australia* (1994) Heathcote noted the changes that had occurred since he had written his first edition (1975). In a similar vein to that of Meinig who warned of the need for leaders to listen to the lessons of the past Heathcote cautioned...
Australia is still a magnificent place in which to live, but there are many problems facing the nation as it approaches the end of the century and I hope that this book will help the reader understand and appreciate some of the problems.

In the current climate of somewhat shallow debate on geographical phenomena, from sea level rise to climate change and everything in between, it continues to be essential to understand the past and the impact it makes on our future. Implicit in the comments from Meinig, Heathcote and many of the other writers of geographical books is the need for authorities to take change into account as they plan for the future and this can only be accomplished with a strong geography which continues to build on the strengths of its past.

End notes
1. A series of lectures given to the American Council of Learned Societies.
3. A South Australian committee chaired by Price which brought together many Adelaide leaders with the purpose of ensuring Australia had a government which could fight the Great Depression.

References


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