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## Geography Old Style

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### Abstract

Geography has been well served by its historians in that there are several good accounts of the evolution of the discipline from its modern reformulation in the mid nineteenth century. These accounts identify some of the key thinkers and actors and the principal currents in the discipline. What they do not give is much, if any, impression of how the discipline would have been experienced by its undergraduate students. Probably the best source for this would be past examination papers and complete sets do not always survive in departmental archives. In this paper I want to urge geographers to explore the history of the discipline through students' eyes and by examination papers.

### Introduction

My sources for the historical geography undergraduate experience are sets of examination papers for finals at the University of Oxford from 1966 to 1968. They are of more than parochial interest, in that Oxford's geography syllabus had changed very little in thirty years and could be seen as a good exemplar of the heyday of regional geography. By the mid 1960s, the winds of the quantitative revolution had begun to blow through syllabi in many United Kingdom geography departments and so there would not be too many of us who experienced regional geography in full flight.

I shall give an overview of the syllabus and then examine the style of examination papers in the light of the now extensive literature on assessment in higher education. Oxford was unusual in that its geography undergraduates did Preliminary Examinations in the second term of their first year and then faced no further public examinations until the Second Public Examination at the end of their third year. The curriculum comprised lectures on many, but not all, examination papers and college and university tutorials (often two per week) and on other papers. Tutorials were usually of an hour's duration and in the period between 1966 and '68, there were standard formats: a tutorial one-to-one, and a tutorial with two students and a single tutor. In both cases, a student essay was to be read aloud and then discussed (or dissected!) by the tutor.

The Honours School in Geography (Second Public Examinations) had the following structure:

- Four compulsory "General Geography" papers; one each in physical geography; human geography; cartography; principles of regional geography and general philosophy of geography.
- Two compulsory "Regional Geography" papers; one on the British Isles (including Ireland) and one on France
- A paper on the "Regional Geography of a Developed Area"; choices here were: Central and Southern Europe; United States of America; the USSR.
- A paper on the "Regional Geography of a Developing Area"; the choices here were: India, Pakistan and what was then still Ceylon; the Middle East; Southern Africa; Southeast Asia; and added in 1968, Latin America.
- Two "Special Papers" on a single thematic topic, but usually with a regional emphasis. The choices available were: Landforms; Economic Geography of Eastern Canada; Social and Political Geography of Tropical Commonwealth Countries (essentially the Caribbean, west and east Africa); Settlement in Australia and New Zealand; Historical Geography of Britain; Cartography and Surveying
- A Regional Dissertation of some 15,000 words on an area of roughly 150 square miles.

All the written papers were of three hours duration and the rubric normally required that four questions be answered. The number of questions varied among the papers, as did the use of compulsory questions or sectioned papers. So, the General Geography paper on physical geography was sectioned, with the requirement to answer from both sections, A (with 6 questions on geomorphology) and B (with 7 questions on climatology, biogeography and soils). The General Geography paper on human geography had ten questions and the General Geography paper on principles of regional geography and the philosophy of geography had two sections, one on each of its themes and both had five questions. The General Geography paper on Cartography, uniquely, had a requirement to answer a compulsory question (changed in 1968 to a choice between two compulsory questions) and one other question from a choice of four. All the Regional Geography papers required the choice of four questions from ten,

except that on France, which gave eleven questions to choose from.

The Special Papers generally had a common format of seven questions and a requirement to answer the first compulsory question and three others. Historical Geography reduced the choice to six questions and requiring that two compulsory questions and one other be answered. Cartography and Surveying demanded answers to five of the seven questions.

It is also worth noting that the ten papers were sat successively in six days, in my case, starting at 09-30 on a Thursday morning and, with just Sunday as a rest day, finishing at 17-00 on a Tuesday evening. I can testify to acute writer's cramp by 17-00 on Saturday evening!

There were some styles of question that were specific to individual papers. Not surprisingly, in the General Paper on Cartography, there was a compulsory question on map interpretation, with a choice offered as to whether you examined a British or a French map. In most years, the scales of the British and French maps were similar (1:63,360 and 1:50,000, for instance), although in 1966 the British map was at 1:25,000 and the French at 1:100,000. The Special Papers, except those in Cartography and Surveying, had a compulsory question requiring candidates to explain or amplify short quotations of around twenty to fifty words from original sources. In Cartography and Surveying, candidates were required to do calculations based on star sightings provided.

The papers, more generally, contained three broad types of question. There were questions containing the verbs 'assess' 'compare' 'describe' 'discuss' 'examine'. Eyes might be raised nowadays at a finals examination question containing 'describe', although it arose in a map interpretation question about the effects of glaciations to be seen. A second type of question contained an assertion, usually placed in single inverted commas, or a direct quotation from an author, although dates and other indications of provenance were not given. A typical examination paper had a third to a half of its questions of this type. The final type of question task was the simple question, such as: Can one recognise in southern Europe the relief and other features of a distinctive Mediterranean morpho-genetic region? (Regional Geography of C

& S Europe 1968); and Is the Soviet government justified on geographical grounds in making the Republic of Kazakhstan an economic region? How otherwise might it be treated? (Regional Geography of USSR, 1966)

The full range of question styles can be seen in the Regional Geography paper on France for 1968 and I offer a selection of questions to show what the detailed regional study might have entailed to undergraduates and how too it might have constrained lecturers and tutors. Note the great range of potential topics on the systematic geography of France (this selection perhaps stresses the economic over other aspects of human geography) and the relatively specific nature of questions on individual French regions. The questions seem to betray a very full and demanding syllabus.

**Q1.** Where is *marais* to be found in France and of what value are such areas to man?

**Q3.** Discuss the relationships between physical geography and human activity in *either* Normandy *or* the Rhône valley south of Lyon.

**Q4.** How do you account for the variety and importance of cereal cultivation in France?

**Q6.** Assess the role of pipelines in the economic geography of France.

**Q7.** In what respects does the climate of Aquitaine differ from that of the remainder of France? How are these differences reflected in human activity?

**Q9.** 'With an average density of 86 persons per square kilometre, France comes fourteenth in the scale of densities of the nations of Europe. This low density is one of the most noteworthy of the country's characteristics.' Discuss.

So, this was regional geography in its heyday. The questions set were not always as nuanced as would be expected today and, also to contemporary eyes, many questions did not offer enough by way of guidance as to what was expected. The breadth of the curriculum also would strike contemporary undergraduates as demanding. As for the general absence of choice compared to modular frameworks, that too would come as a shock to most contemporary undergraduates. Perhaps, with apologies to L P Hartley, the past was a different country where its regions were differently dissected.