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Digging in the Dirt: Unnatural Histories and the “Art of Not Dividing”

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My sincere thanks to the Historical Geography Specialty Group and to the journal *Historical Geography* for this terrific surprise and honor. I have a theme and perhaps a message, but mainly I want to think with you about things we do not often get much time to discuss, but which are critical to the growth and life of this subdiscipline we are celebrating here: historical geography. I want to think with you about the human role in the future of the planet—something that sounds “big” but of course is very much connected to the “small”—the AAG conference rooms like this in which we gather to talk and the places (the riverbanks, couches, car and bicycle routes...) where many of us do our best thinking. I want to recognize our diversity, not just in terms of our research areas, but the many cultures of historical geography which have shaped us and our work.

To ground my thoughts, I have chosen three objects—maybe better understood as “events”—connected with particular and fairly mundane commonplaces: wetlands. Mundane is interesting because as Wittgenstein said: “the aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity.”¹ Wetlands are also, to paraphrase Levi-Strauss, “good to think with,” because they are saturated with so many common problems and every day concerns. The three things acting as points of departure are: (1) a slough: a type of wetland, closer to the abject category than “marsh” or “fen”; (2) wine, which I have often been reminded by senior colleagues is “historical geography in a bottle”; and (3) a bittern, a bird known for being heard rather than seen.

But first, I want to acknowledge this city where we are gathered: Washington, D.C., the site of one of my best archival adventures ever. It took me to the Freud Archives at the Library of Congress to find the dream of Arthur George Tansley, plant geographer, psychoanalysis enthusiast, and

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founder of British ecology.² Tansley introduced the concept of “ecosystem” – but also, many years earlier, the term “anthropogenic” (meaning “produced by humans”), a very resonant twenty-first century term as it has more recently developed associations with global warming and climate change. When Tansley used the word in his 1923 *Practical Plant Ecology*,³ it was only employed in association with plant life to think about humanly modified vegetation: in 1935 he applied it to his ecosystem concept.

Beginning with a focus on anthropogenic nature, this discussion explores new historical geographies of nature and a few of the intrigues of archival digging and listening. My general idea is that by unearthing along the way some critical geographies of our subdiscipline as we dig in our collective dirt a bit, we might consider not only its possible futures but also contributions to living well – to creating fruitful places – on our thoroughly touched planet. This lecture also is about gratitude to various people and to places that I have passed through. Everything I have done is because someone helped; so again, thank you.

When I first started training as an historical geographer in the United Kingdom, there was a transition from *doing* historical work but *calling* oneself a “cultural geographer” to then proudly taking on a re-jigged “historical geographer” identity. Suddenly it seemed, historical geography was (relatively speaking) “hot.” After various linguistic, cultural, historical, spatial turns, I am not sure where we are in terms of what new and upcoming researchers want to call themselves, but it is also interesting to look backwards. Recently I pulled out Jean Brown Mitchell’s 1954 book *Historical Geography* to look again at her schematic diagram entitled “Geography: The Study of Place.”⁴ The book itself is a fascinating study not just because it was the *only* book in English on the nature of historical geography for thirty years⁵ but because, as Mona Domosh has pointed out, the figure of the geographer – even “J.B.” the author – appears only in masculine guise.⁶ Also very interesting is Mitchell’s central positioning of historical geography in her diagram as a bridging discipline between “Geography of the Natural Environment” and “Geography of the Human Communities” (see Figure 1). The impetus for me to recall Mitchell’s schema was Noel Castree’s recent placing of “Environmental Geography” in this very similar middle ground between Physical and Human Geography. In his configuration, historical geography sits off to the side in the Human Geography section.⁷

Such a desire to hold the center likely has a lot to do with a discipline’s survival narrative. In times of dwindling jobs and budgets, we tell the story that reinforces indispensability. In arguing for disciplinary unity, Mitchell quoted Vidal de la Blache’s notion that “what geography, in exchange for the help which it receives from other sciences can bring to the common treasury, is the art of not dividing what nature brings together.”⁸ Geographers of course study nature in myriad and even competing ways: but there is in fact something about Vidal de la Blache’s art of “not dividing” that sounds good to me. If we put that word nature in quotes or qualify it with an historical geographer’s sense of “storied nature” or even replace it altogether with the word “place” (something always in the

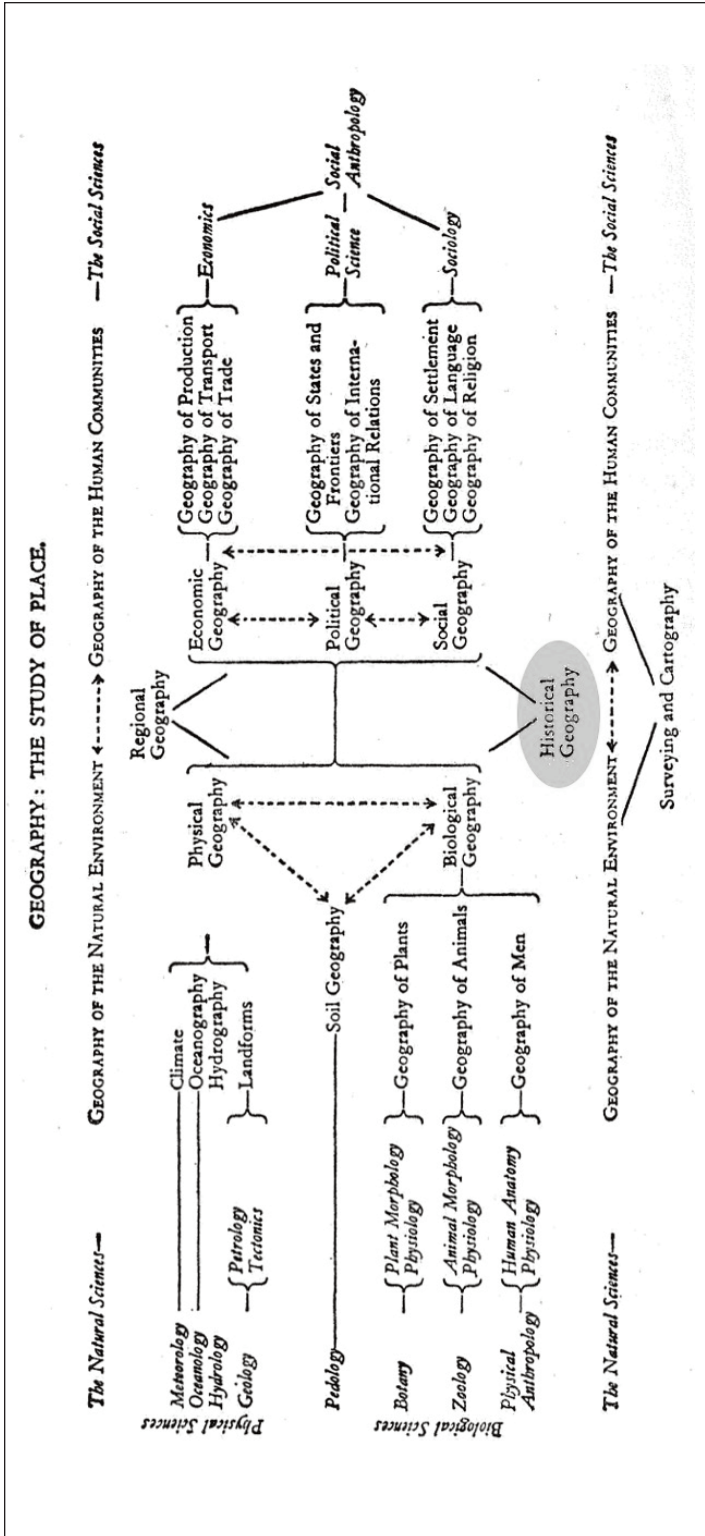


Figure 1. J. B. Mitchell, Historical Geography. First published 1954. Third impression (London: The English Universities Press, 1963), p. 326. Reprinted in 1975 by Hodder & Stoughton, Ltd. Highlighting for "Historical Geography" added. (Diagram reproduced here by permission of the publisher.)

making, in practice, in process), I frankly would be happy to argue that historical geography is – à la Jean Mitchell – a really productive gathering spot for the discipline.

There is, however, something else to point out about Mitchell's diagram. As Geertz says: "the answers to our most general questions – why? how? what? whither? [for me: where is nature? for whom?] – to the degree they have answers, are to be found in the fine detail of a lived life."⁹ If we look at this diagram in term of "lived lives" of geographers, we find them often tracing very messy lines through the neat schematic. Tansley begins over in the "Geography of Plants" but makes excursions off the chart into psychology. Many of us could tell similar stories or perhaps have colleagues like John Holmes who began in geomorphology but ends up via the quantitative revolution and Marxist political economy in the territory of "Economic Geography." Another colleague at Queen's University, Audrey Kobayashi, Vice-President of the AAG, began in the humanities and followed the linguistic turn into "Historical Geography."¹⁰ Add the existence of many different cultures of geography and historical geography through which these people have passed and we have quite a "tangled skein" indeed.¹¹

These days many of us are struggling to maintain quality in programs or simply to maintain programs, period. And of course we struggle and hope within a bigger survival narrative than individual fates and careers, the story of climate change and planet abuse. As historical geographers, what do we do? What is in our tool kit? Against the advice of my eleven year-old son, I thought I would play a clip for you from *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (group digging sequence) because it cuts to the chase: What do we do well as historical geographers? We dig! The type of digging I am talking about is of course archival digging through records of all sorts, asking questions, listening. I have written about some of the dangers of archival digging with regards to ethics and our responsibilities to living, vulnerable people.¹² But here I would stress also that archival digging can be destructive in a good way. It can destroy colonial myths, destabilize dominant narratives, unsettle sedimentations of nation/nature/race that have been naturalized in our everyday landscapes. As an historical geographer of nature, I have learned that such "destructive" activity makes for a contentious topic. For some, nature is so very obviously distinct from society: "How dare you question aims and motivations of park-making, of conservation?" "Who are you to dig into the details of someone's life, to sketch grey areas into a Great Man's or Great Woman's clean slate?" "If you expose contexts showing that there is no mother Nature, capital N, are you not just opening the floodgates to environmental destruction?"

I. The Hope Slough

*...De petits enfants
étouffent des malédictions
le long des rivières.*

– Arthur Rimbaud (“Jeunesse”)

There is a saying that one should dive inwards – or dig deep – before proceeding forward. And in that spirit I would ask you to imagine with me a place called the Hope Slough. It is, like other sloughs, “an overflow channel where water flows sluggishly for considerable distances” though this one has some deep places. Stagnant, algae-filled, resonant in this Bible Belt of the Fraser Valley of British Columbia, Canada, with John Bunyan’s allegory “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” in which the character Christian sinks into the Slough of Despond, “slough” seems to sit paradoxically beside the word “Hope.” Like “sharply dull” it suggests an oxymoron. It is not clear where the name “Hope” comes from, though it is likely related to the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Fort Hope which once stood further up the Fraser Valley;¹³ the Hope Slough winds from roughly this direction. My older brother, who like me has known the Hope Slough since childhood, tells me he still dreams of it and remembers the colonial landscapes in which we played as kids.

You went through the Indian Reserve to get there. We called it ‘The Jig.’ There was a trail that led to two swimming holes. Little Rock and Big Rock. Of course ‘Big Rock’ was the preferred destination as it was...well...bigger. It was a little creepy to get to, because there were random graves with headstones on the way there, all overgrown and spooky. Big Rock was a bit of a rocky shelf maybe six feet above the water. There was a rope that you could swing out on. It was very deep there. At least no one I know ever dared to touch the bottom. I swam there a few times and the last time, I swallowed a bit of water and immediately puked. Lots of cow poo in the mix.¹⁴

This was very much an anthropogenic wetland. It looked natural but it wasn’t; in this time it was channeled and filled with farm effluent. Closer to home I used to sit with my best friend by the edge of the slough, and we would imagine how when we were grown up, we would dredge out the bottom, clean it up, bring back the salmon....

I mention this because, in the spirit of digging deep, the Hope Slough feeling of swimming through heavy, dirty water has never left my dreams either. Upon reflection, it has provided some continuity to my research life, for example the pool in the shape of a double-headed Byzantine eagle that one of Tansley’s colleagues, ecologist Marietta Pallis, had carved into her property on the Norfolk Broads.¹⁵ After her partner, Phillis Clark died, Pallis had her buried in the center island and would swim around the grave. The dip I took myself was uncanny: undeniably foreign, yet

strangely familiar like the Hope Slough.

And through the years, new stories of such human-produced places keep washing up. More to the point, the discovery that a place thought natural was actually unnatural or anthropogenic has provided some of the more surprising stories of the twentieth century. Pallis, in the process of digging this pool, contributed to the discovery in the 1950s that the Norfolk Broads landscape, an area of open sheets of water and linking channels in England, was not natural but was largely created by medieval peat diggings.¹⁶ The *Journal of Paleolimnology* reports that recent data collected from the Canadian Arctic suggest that the whaling activities of Thule Inuit altered freshwater ecosystems centuries earlier than scientists have believed.¹⁷ Charles Mann's *1491* alerts us to the knowledge that "[t]he forest that the first New England colonists thought was primeval and enduring was actually in the midst of violent change and demographic collapse."¹⁸ Areas of the Amazon once thought to be original jungle have been found to be sites of pre-contact civilizations with extensive deposits of fertile anthropogenic soil — *terra preta* — to support them. When investigated historically, "natural" waterways and channels in the Amazon are found to be created and manipulated by people.¹⁹ Hugh Raffles, who has worked his discursive shuttle in this very area, says that "Such practices...undermine the attempts of scholars to produce causative models in which it is nature, even if in the last instance, that determines culture and political economy."²⁰ They counter pervasive ideas like "carrying capacity"²¹ and work, as well, to explode notions like *terra nullius*.

Some of the archival labor to rematerialize human presence in historical landscapes has been done by historical geographers and anthropologists. Such work has problematized concepts like "pristine baseline," investigated the ways international dialogue has shaped ecological practice with regard to the "natural,"²² and detailed how ecological analysis in particular has facilitated erasures of human presence and activity in landscapes ranging from the Danube Delta to Cape Breton Island.²³ Many of these analyses tend to highlight the discursive work that is done in the naturalist's or ecologist's "stripped-down" descriptions of place "in which the social is excised from a world of nature" bringing "places into existence as the imagined sites of functional natural processes."²⁴ Thus rendered timeless, they are outside of history.

Later, in my twenties, I learned the fuller extent of the Fraser Valley's anthropogenic landscapes: my friend and I had also grown up near the edge of a drained lake. We never knew about the lake; it was not one of those stories we learned in school where local history was overlooked in the curriculum of European history and World Wars One and Two. This was Sumas Lake, a name which translates from the Stó:lō language of Halq'eméylem as "big opening": a sometimes vast, shallow lake drained in the 1920s. The process of unearthing the story of the lake became my book *Openings* which explores the historical nature of nature, the loss of cultural memory and the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples of land and water.

Notes for practice

*"...the honouring of place – no matter how changed – provides one positive opening to interconnected and engaged history. To honour is to question."*²⁵

*There is no great divide between universal knowledge and the local knowledge of everyone else....*²⁶

Bruno Latour, another one of the inspirations for this lake research, has a digging insect analogy which emphasizes the incontrovertible local status of all knowledges: there is no "Great Divide between universal knowledge of the Westerners and the local knowledge of everyone else, but instead that they travel inside narrow and fragile networks, resembling the galleries termites build to link their nests to their feeding sites." It is vital to acknowledge that, nevertheless, situated study reveals that certain knowledge travels further and faster or is made more or less visible in different historical contexts.²⁷ Yet, in the University of British Columbia culture of history at that point, Latour's insight made me question the "powers that be" and this work on Sumas Lake felt like an unsettling of hierarchy. The prestigious history was then European or Intellectual History – *not* Canadian and certainly *not* local. So a word for mentors: the late Stephen Straker, the brilliant teacher and interdisciplinary philosopher of science with his crazy office stacked with old typewriters, was uncertain of my project but he trusted me, and that mattered enormously. My supervisor Dianne Newell was the only woman faculty member at the time. Like other history professors her office was on the top floor of Buchanan Tower. When I first came to her office, the window had just been blown in by a storm, shattering all over her desk, embedding pieces of glass in the wall. Sheer luck kept her at home when it happened. When I met her she was standing in front of this boarded up window. It was a highly dramatic image – like yes! – here was this unpredictable opening in this place, punched right into the tower; together we can shake things up. Besides inspiring my local oral history project, this story also had a life as a rumor that a window in the tower broke because a woman professor jumped. This was disturbing because even though it was false, it was just the kind of story that resonated in this heavily male, white and fairly conservative historical culture. And this brings me to my second object.

II. A wine bottle

Why a wine bottle? The reasons (and the connection to wetlands) are more associative than direct but I will get to them. A Commonwealth Scholarship took me to the University of Cambridge. A combination of things had me jump disciplines including the advice of the History Department's historical geographer Arthur (Skip) Ray and the exciting culture of geography at UBC where I had been lurking to watch the sparks fly between graduate students like David Demeritt, Noel Castree, Matthew Sparke, and Bruce Braun. There is much to say about differences and similarities

between history and geography. Alan Baker has explored many of them but particularly their productive interdependence.²⁸ Back in the nineties, one difference that struck me was the stronger critical edge in geography, a sense that there is always a need to justify the historical tack taken. The historical question “why?” “for what purpose?” is never taken for granted. And geographers like Doreen Massey were offering many rich and critical approaches for research, talking about “places as meeting points of social relations, as the outcomes of difference and inequality that also produce difference and inequality.”²⁹

When I met with the Master of my college, Lord St. John of Fawsley, he extended his hand and said, “I understand you are from *our* Canada.” I laughed. I thought he was kidding (I thought, in fact, I was in a Monty Python sketch for the first several months). To me and my English friend from Shepherd’s Bush, matriculation, when it was not completely surreal, seemed an alarming attempt to produce geographical anxiety and exclusion. As we recall, the Praelector said something akin to the following: “Those of you from England, sign the College book with the historic name of your county. Those of you from places we know about, for example, former colonies, sign the name of the province – no need to include your city. Those of you from further afield, say, from Africa, simply write the name of your country.” Suddenly intent on writing down the name of the small city I was from (Chilliwack never seemed so important), but hesitating as I read the entries above, the Master asked, “you can write can’t you?” My last sight of him years later was late one evening as he strolled alone through the Fellows’ Garden in a festive mood, holding high a bottle of wine.

Besides wanting to flee, I continued to develop the notion that I was going to the historical heart of past empire to challenge hierarchies and attitudes, some of which were ingrained in my own community, i.e., “Canada has a lot of geography but no history.” I had, at first, the strong defensive sense of disengaging and becoming a spy or the Latourian anthropologist coming back from the tropics to study the West. I would study power and those who in Gary Werskey’s phrase “practised their research within the most rarified and powerful of scientific communities, Cambridge.”³⁰ That idea cheered me up somewhat. Again, I wanted to do local history, but this time to study the institution and the institutionalization of nature; and thus, in a new way, approach cultures of natures.

The translocal movement from Vancouver to Cambridge was also a shift to a different culture of nature. My focus on the wilderness myth was not immediately resonant. Coming from British Columbia at time of intense trials regarding aboriginal title, the politics of knowledge did not have the same valence. Coming from the old growth coastal forests my sense of Ancient Forests was definitely *not* a meadow with a few heavily pollarded ancient trees, however delightfully explicated by Oliver Rackham. Although I came from the Fraser Valley where most of the wetlands have been drained, my idea of a wetland was not Wicken Fen – a tiny fragment of the once great Fenland near Cambridge lined with plastic to

keep the water from coming out. "Dionysian or Apollonian: which are you?"³¹ Michael Pollan has recently used this particular pairing to speak of two key contrasting relations with nature: Apollo, the god of order and firm control over nature; Dionysius, the god of wine and chaotic nature.³² In worshipping Dionysius and becoming intoxicated with his wine, the Athenians returned to nature, temporarily acknowledging kinship with plants and animals.

For Cambridge botanists, zoologists, and ecologists like Tansley, Wicken Fen was more of an Apollonian venture, a site of scientific research and ecological management. Through their work at Wicken Fen, Tansley and others were beginning, in the first decade of the twentieth century, to stress the importance of expert interference in nature reserves. For Tansley, human intervention, such as the cutting of the fen vegetation over the long term, had largely created nature as it existed in England. Having lost the possibility of protecting pure Nature—the innocence of preservation—Tansley asserted the responsibility to regulate it.³³ As J. J. Thomson, member of the Wicken Fen Committee (and discoverer of the electron), announced at a fundraising luncheon at Gonville and Caius College in late July 1927, this new research "had shown that the Fen was not entirely natural, but needed the cooperation of man. If it was left to itself it would turn into bush."³⁴ Thomson praised his listeners and stressed the wayward nature of the Fen; with their generous donations they could help make trustworthy knowledge of nature. Although Cambridge's control over the Fen was fiercely contested by locals,³⁵ Thomson, safe in the College milieu, quipped, "Apparently, it was a sort of transitory thing, and so we want to keep Wicken Fen near Cambridge." The *Press and News* noted that his inside joke was met with both "[l]aughter and applause."³⁶

Notes for practice

*Look for rules as to what can be said where.*³⁷

As Miles Ogborn quoted David Livingstone in his excellent Distinguished Lecture in 2009, "the umbilical links between location and locution force us to take seriously what could, and could not, be said in certain spaces, as well as what could, and could not, be heard there." Such a key insight, pursued too by David Matless in pieces like "Sonic Geography in a Nature Region,"³⁸ can travel into our spaces of geographical knowledge making, even into our departments. I am sure we can all think of such rules, often tacit, governing our particular locales; perhaps it is easier to recall the restricting rather than facilitating ones. Working to juggle work/life, I recall bringing my toddler into the department at Cambridge and being told by an otherwise supportive faculty member "this is *not* an airport."

As there are many cultures of nature, there are many cultures of historical geography. At Cambridge, where so much was about order, not walking on the Fellow's Lawn and so forth, the group of historical

geographers I encountered leaned towards the Dionysian, especially on Friday nights when the Occasional Discussions in Historical Geography met (an irreverent variant was Occasional Discussions in Hysterical Geography). A core activity for historical geography in Cambridge, the ODHG began in 1968, the very year Jean Mitchell retired her university lectureship in the Cambridge Department of Geography. She apparently never addressed the ODHG though she lived until 1990. Lucy Adrian, the author of a recent entry on Mitchell in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*,³⁹ was, in 1975, the first woman to speak. The list of talks⁴⁰ is a riveting reminder of exceptional contributors to historical geography, many considered founders of the discipline like H. C. Darby and A. H. Clark, and many keenly missed scholars more recently amongst us, such as Denis Cosgrove and Michael Williams. Raymond Williams, who would later define nature as “perhaps the most complex word in the [English] language,”⁴¹ and noted “the extraordinary amount of human history”⁴² embedded in the idea, spoke in 1978 on “Literary Perceptions of the Modern City.” Women were fewer and far between until the 1990s but include Mona Domosh, Kay Anderson, and Catherine Nash. Many Canadians spoke including Brian Osborne, Peter Goheen, and Arthur Ray; in 1982, R. Cole Harris spoke on “This historical geography of a wilderness.”

Alan Baker, and it is to his generosity and openness that I am indebted for this information, was the faculty member involved but as he says “a great deal of enthusiasm was provided by graduate students of that era — John Patten, Harold Fox, and Richard Smith.”⁴³ Alan has long advocated that “histories by insiders should be produced as well as histories by outsiders.” I am not quite sure how to draw that line for myself. I know I did not always get the jokes, and I do not know that people always got mine. But an outsider’s perspective might go something like this: choose someone from far away like Australia or Wales — ply the guest with sherry, wine, and perhaps port — sit him or her in a comfortable seat for a talk; and then, when all defenses are down, pounce with a variable and cascading series of three-point questions. Having concluded the ordeal, the guest would be asked to sign a wine bottle. I was invited to help lead a discussion about Bruno Latour. The joke was that we were welcome to discuss Latour because Latour was from a well established wine-making family (true enough, and Latour also has written that it is his life’s ambition to write a book that would be as appreciated as a fine bottle of wine). I am certain that there is a fascinating study to be done on the place of alcoholic beverages in geographies of knowledge, and at Cambridge it would look at gentlemanly culture, trust, and the making of truth, identity, gender and, undoubtedly, class. (At Wicken Fen, there were stories of the keeper working to break down the class barrier between the academics and the Fen employees with a shared beer — otherwise the workers at the Fen “would just tell you what you wanted to hear.”⁴⁴) There was a certain exclusivity to the ODHG; or so it appeared to me. However, no rituals bind to me secrecy now or involved the ceremonial ingestion of some repulsive concoction such as fried slugs — unlike the Cambridge Natural Science Club, in which

at the commencement of each meeting in the early days, the Junior Member was called upon to “eat the whale.”⁴⁵ Tansley would speak to that particular Cambridge discussion group on “dreams and daydreams” in 1922; in 1999, I would get to speak to the ODHG about Tansley.

Tansley adored fine wine but what I found particularly noteworthy about him and worth talking about was that his principal contributions were, in contradistinction to American ecology, to emphasize the systemic interrelations of human activity and botanical phenomena. He saw no real functional or moral difference between “natural” and “anthropogenic” ecosystems.⁴⁶ But he was frequently in communication with North Americans, in particular his teetotaler colleague Frederic Clements.

Writing in public response to ideas of Clements as taken up by his South African “disciple” John Phillips, Tansley argued that

It is obvious that modern civilized man upsets the ‘natural’ ecosystems or ‘biotic communities’ on a very large scale. But it would be difficult, not to say impossible, to draw a natural line between the activities of the human tribes which presumably fitted into and formed parts of ‘biotic communities’ and the destructive human activities of the modern world. Is man part of ‘nature’ or not?...Regarded as an exceptionally powerful biotic factor which increasingly upsets the equilibrium of preexisting ecosystems and eventually destroys them, at the same time forming new ones of very different nature, human activity finds its proper place in ecology.

...anthropogenic ecosystems differ from those developed independently of man. But the essential formative processes of the vegetation are the same, however the factors initiating them are directed....We must have a system of ecological concepts which will allow of the inclusion of *all* forms of vegetational expression and activity. We cannot confine ourselves to the so-called ‘natural’ entities and ignore the processes and expressions of vegetation now so abundantly provided us by the activities of man....⁴⁷

For Tansley, open in this instance to Dionysian blurring of boundaries, the line between destructive and non-destructive human activity was rendered irrelevant for ecological study.

Although Tansley made humans central to the ecosystem concept, they tended to disappear in successive formulations of the ecosystem until the 1990s when ecologists became interested in disturbance and chaos theory. Scientist Paul Crutzen has called our current epoch the “Anthropocene” because human activities have grown to significantly impact the earth and the atmosphere. And Tansley’s challenge has resurfaced with the ever-increasing use of this term: are humans part of nature or not? With the challenge comes the somewhat alarming idea, as Donald Worster has suggested, that Tansley had effectively rejected any quest for a natural yardstick by which to measure the damage done by technological man.⁴⁸

There was only a human responsibility to conserve and only humans to answer the question: “How far can one intervene?” For Tansley it was clear which humans should determine such things—ecologists. Of course the answer is hardly clear and people question the privileged role of science in saying what nature should be like with both left and right agendas (i.e., with regard to the latter, Environment Canada’s “muzzling” of climate scientists since 2007). Humans have a central role in ecology, but unlike Tansley, who sounded an earlier bell with regards to anthropogenic ecosystems, we must, in recognizing this reality, put considerable stress on the question of voice— who and what gets heard?— in the control rooms.

III. A bittern (and its deep booming call)

The playback of a bittern marks the briefest though loudest section of this talk. Although this bittern was recorded in Southern Ontario, it winters as far away as Mexico. Returning to Canada from the United Kingdom and reconnecting with Canadian research groups and questions, a key bridging theme from my past work in Canada has been migratory species and aural geographies:⁴⁹ how have people connected to place through birds? In moving, how do birds move us? I also have been concerned with historical geographies of race and nature and the ways in which these categories historically have been entwined in Canadian thought and environmental practice. A 2008 workshop on these themes is now a forthcoming co-edited book with Andrew Baldwin and Audrey Kobayashi entitled *Rethinking the Great White North: Race, Nature and the Historical Geographies of Whiteness*. My newest project focuses on a national park in southern Ontario, Point Pelee, created in 1918—this marsh is now designated as an internationally significant wetland—and responds to the need for thorough contextualization of such so-called “natural spaces.” How have naturalisms and racisms been historically and geographically situated here?

Notes for practice

“the political stakes of race and nature lie in the ways they become articulated together in particular historical moments” [and in particular geographies]⁵⁰

“Thousands of International Flights Daily!” is the motto of the annual Point Pelee Festival of Birds in which legions of birders gather in Leamington, Essex County, Ontario each May to welcome the migratory birds returning from their wintering grounds in southern locales. Yet, the celebration of migratory species passing through Point Pelee from Mexico and the Caribbean is in stark contrast to the ambivalence accorded migratory Mexican and Caribbean workers who have been coming to the region since the 1970s to labor on Leamington’s tomato farms.⁵¹ As a site of confluence (of diverse peoples and animals) and contention (birders,

scientists, residents, First Nations, migrant workers) since the late nineteenth century, Leamington is a resonant site for examining recent historical claims concerning the spatial logic of race and nature in Canada.⁵² The hope is that this project will contribute to understanding the meanings of migratory species and document the “imaginative geographies both of ourselves and of distant others”⁵³ that have been entailed in the historical attempts to conceive and make visible the lives of migratory birds. In working for “just” natures, it is vital to attend to the moments of place that, as Massey relates, “stretch beyond it, tying any particular locality into wider relations and processes in which other places are implicated too.”⁵⁴

Conclusion

Wetlands all over the world continue to disappear due to human activities. Situated at the land-water interface, wetlands are extremely vulnerable to potential effects of climate change. Recognizing all this, I want to end with a few optimistic wetland stories—because such things are sometimes radical models, seeds of hope, material practices for change.

Upon returning to the Hope Slough recently, I learned that it has been dug out in places and some fish have chosen to return. In 2005, with support from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, a spawning channel was constructed.⁵⁵ In the following months, three Pacific salmon species (Chum, Chinook, and Coho) were observed spawning in the new gravel beds. A map entitled “Stó:lō Nation Treaty Table Statement of Intent” illustrates the Indian Reserve my brother cut through years ago in order to reach it. That the treaty process remains slow is because, as Brian Egan points out there are “fundamentally different visions held by the Crown and Indigenous peoples about how reconciliation is to be achieved.”⁵⁶ But after 140 years of BC denying Aboriginal title, such cartographic imaginations, so recently marginalized, are poised to resettle matters of land and water.

In my focus on such places as the Hope Slough, Sumas Lake, Pallis’s pool, Wicken Fen, and Point Pelee, I want to suggest that historical geography may be appreciated as “the art of not dividing.” As we dig and tell “place histories for people”⁵⁷ or as the late Michael Williams quoted Bill Cronon, we “tell stories about stories about nature,”⁵⁸ we may practice, not only the art of not dividing history from geography, but also not separating considerations of words from things, of orality from textuality, of the local from the “universal,” or of locution from location. We may also practice the art of not dividing discussions of emotions “from our re-writing of the earth”⁵⁹ and not separating the “social” and “political”—questions of identity, race, gender, class, sexuality—from that historically categorized as “nature.”

This *is* an art. It is creative, something involving careful choice that we can learn by study and practice and observation. In finding, for instance, political links between social and natural orders we might trace biographical detail, fieldwork practice, footnotes or, as Tansley suggested, language.

But throughout this practice, I would go further than our academic focus *per se* and suggest we make historical geography the art of not dividing considerations of life enabling work and *vice versa*. In doing so, we apply our “notes for practice” to places we research as well as the places where we get together. This is not a sideline issue. Fortunately, there are many lively places for us to consider (albeit many of them online) and many hopeful stories.

Spin-offs of the ODHG remain key for the cultures. Some historical geographers in London who had experienced the ODHG in Cambridge (such as Miles Ogborn and Felix Driver) set up a series of late-afternoon meetings organized as the London Group of Historical Geographers. This is still going strong, with four to six meetings each term. The origin of the International Conference of Historical Geography (ICHG) goes back to 1975 and my own University when Brian Osborne (who had spoken about the historical geography of Canada in the ODHG two years earlier) convened a British-Canadian Symposium on Historical Geography at Queen’s University in Kingston with help of Robin Butlin and Alan Baker.⁶⁰ The gentlemen’s society culture mentioned earlier has had resonance: Deryck Holdsworth and Audrey Kobayashi, in reporting on the 1995 ICHG in Singapore and Australia referred to the “Canadian/British axis of participation that has historically driven content and debate”⁶¹ and made key points on the epistemology of laughter. They wrote:

For some, as became clear in the business meeting to close the sessions, this network is still overwhelmingly male and white, and for all the signals of welcome to all, it can feel very much like coming late to a dinner party when the chumminess and the jokes take on an insider meaning. In such a situation, even laughter expresses the epistemology of its discipline, as we realize that what makes us comfortable, able to laugh, is that which is familiar and uncontested.⁶²

I would call this report a hopeful story in that important critique was aired and published however uncomfortable it made people. Although admittedly I am part of that Canadian/British axis, I have the sense that such stories have the effect of making our places of historical geography, and our work, more self-reflective and open. While acknowledging the privileged use of English in Kyoto for the 2009 ICHG, Felix Driver and Graeme Wynn report a much more expanded sense of place and a “willingness of speakers to engage with agendas and approaches that transcend ‘national’ schools and traditional frameworks of historical geography.”⁶³

There is much more to mention and celebrate, including the Historical Geography Research Group of the Institute of British Geographers (I am grateful to Catherine Nash who introduced me to the HGRG and the many cultures of British historical geography). A few years ago, the Historical Geography Specialty Group of the American Association of Geographers gained a Study Group counterpart in the CAG—and concerns about diversity have been front and center for the HGSG, now under the

leadership of David Rossiter. Their online survey has questions like: "Do you feel the HGSG community is representative of the diversity of scholars currently working in historical geography of Canada?"⁶⁴ There are the two journals for historical geography and of course there is much interdisciplinary work. An exciting development for historical geography and environmental history is NiCHE (Network in Canadian History and Environment), a research cluster that aims in part to facilitate communication between scholars and different publics.

Places thrive and die in relation to us. We are lucky to be geographers, as Jean Mitchell says, with our subject matter with us and about us all the time. "But the geographer is also a student with grave responsibilities."⁶⁵ The more we know of the past and the way things have changed, the better we are able to "appreciate the intricate and complexly inter-related consequences" that alterations in our environment bring about.⁶⁶ So in honor of all of our historical geographical pursuits I will end with what, if mass recitation was more appealing, we might call the Mitchell Pledge (slightly edited from the original for inclusive language): the more we know, "the more, therefore, is it incumbent on us to work, in so far as in us lies, for changes that would seem to make for...the lasting fruitfulness of the place."⁶⁷

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Notes

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Third Edition, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Basil Blackwell & Mott, Ltd., 1958), p. 50e, section 129. Cited in Hugh Raffles, *In Amazonia: A Natural History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), 181.
2. Laura Cameron, "Oral History in the Freud Archives: Incidents, Ethics, and Relations," *Historical Geography* 29 (Spring 2001): 38-44; Laura Cameron and John Forrester, "A Nice Type of the English Scientist: Tansley and Freud," *History Workshop Journal* 48 (Autumn 1999): 64-100.
3. A.G. Tansley, *Practical Plant Ecology* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1923), 48. Cited in the 1989 *Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition*. The word may be Tansley's English translation of the word "anthropogenen" as employed by his Swiss botanical colleague Carl Schröter to describe the human shaping of vegetation; see Schröter "Einige Vergleiche Zwischen Britischer und Schweizerischer Vegetation," *New Phytologist* 11, No. 8 (Oct, 1912): 278.
4. J. B. Mitchell, *Historical Geography*. First published 1954. Third impression (London: The English Universities Press, 1963), 326.
5. Alan R. H. Baker, *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide* (Cambridge:

- Cambridge University Press, 2003), 10.
6. Mona Domosh, "With 'Stout Boots and a Stout Heart': Historical Methodology and Feminist Geography," in Paul Jones III, Heidi Nast, and Susan Roberts, eds., *Thresholds in Feminist Geography: Difference, Methodology, Representation* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997), 225.
 7. Noel Castree, David Demeritt, Diana Liverman, Bruce Rhoads, eds., *A Companion to Environmental Geography* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 2.
 8. Mitchell, *Historical Geography*, 325.
 9. Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), xi.
 10. Interestingly both for Queen's University and the profile of historical geography, Queen's geographer, Anne Godlewska, is president of the Canadian Association of Geographers. Simultaneously, Kobayashi and Godlewska will be Presidents of their respective organizations. Both have worked in archives and both have trained fine historical geographers.
 11. The resonant phrase is Jean Mitchell's, although she uses it not with regard to her diagram but to refer to the "tangled skein of indissoluble ties that links the place as it is today to the place as it was in the past." See Mitchell, *Historical Geography*, page 331.
 12. Cameron, "Oral History in the Freud Archives."
 13. Hope is the site of the Hudson Bay Company's Fort Hope established 1848-9 after "an all-British route from Fort Kamloops to Fort Langley was found north of the 49th parallel, answering a "hope" of the company." Alan Rayburn, *Place Names of Canada* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 123.
 14. David Cameron, email communication, March 2010.
 15. David Matless and Laura Cameron, "Experiment in Landscape: The Norfolk Excavations of Marietta Pallis," *Journal of Historical Geography* 32, No. 1 (2006) 96-126.
 16. *Ibid.*
 17. Kristopher R. Hadley, Marianne S. V. Douglas, Robert McGhee, Jules M. Blais, John P. Smol, "Ecological influences of Thule Inuit whalers on high Arctic pond ecosystems: a comparative paleolimnological study from Bathurst Island (Nunavut, Canada)," *Journal of Paleolimnology*, DOI 10.1007/s10933-009-9388-6.
 18. Charles Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 353.
 19. Raffles, *In Amazonia*, 32.
 20. *Ibid.*
 21. *Ibid.* See also William Adams, "When Nature Won't Stand Still," in Bill Adams and Martin Mulligan, eds., *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in Postcolonial Era* (London: Earthscan Publications, 2003), 220-246.
 22. Laura Cameron and David Matless, "Translocal Ecologies: The Norfolk Broads, the 'natural,' and the International Phytogeographical Excursion, 1911," *Journal of the History of Biology*, forthcoming.
 23. See for instance, Raffles, *In Amazonia*, 2002; Laura Cameron and David Matless, "Benign Ecology: Marietta Pallis and the Floating Fen of the Delta of the Danube, 1912-1916," *Cultural Geographies* 10 (2003): 253-277; Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, "Cap Rouge Remembered: Whiteness, Scenery, and Memory in Cape Breton Highlands National Park," in Andrew Baldwin, Laura Cameron, and Audrey Kobayashi, eds., *Rethinking the Great White North: Race, Nature, and Historical Geography of Whiteness*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, forthcoming).

24. Raffles, *In Amazonia*, p. 174.
25. Laura Cameron, *Openings: A Meditation on History, Method, and Sumas Lake* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 15.
26. Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 232.
27. See for instance Stephen Boocking, "Indigenous knowledge and science, race and colonial authority in northern Canada," in Baldwin, Cameron, and Kobayshi, eds., *Rethinking the Great White North*.
28. See Baker, *Geography and History*.
29. Raffles, *In Amazonia*, 183.
30. Gary Werskey, *The Visible College* (London: Allen Lane, 1978), 77.
31. Historical geographer Jason Grek Martin mentioned to me that he has asked this of his classes on "people, place, and environment" at Saint Mary's University; it makes for a nice wake-up call.
32. Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire* (New York: Random House, 2001).
33. Laura Cameron, "Histories of Disturbance," *Radical History Review* 74 (1999) 2-24.
34. Anonymous, "Fenland's 'National Park' appeal for funds for preservation of Wicken Fen," *Press and News*, 15 July 1927.
35. Laura Cameron, *Anthropogenic Natures: Wicken Fen and Histories of Disturbance, 1923-1943*, Ph.D thesis, 2001.
36. Anonymous, "Fenland's 'National Park' appeal," 15 July 1927.
37. Miles Ogborn, "Francis William's Bad Language: Historical Geography in a World of Practice," *Historical Geography* 37 (2009): 11.
38. David Matless, "Sonic Geography in a Nature Region," *Social and Cultural Geography* 6, No. 5 (October 2005): 745-766.
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40. "Cambridge Occasional Discussions in Historical Geography, 1968" list compiled by Alan Baker.
41. Raymond William, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1983), 219.
42. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 2005; first printed 1980), 67.
43. Alan Baker, email communication, March 2010. See Alan R. H. Baker, "Twenty Years of 'Discussions' in Historical Geography," *Historical Geography* 18, No. 2: 3-4.
44. Max Walters, interview with the author, May 22, 1997.
45. *Cambridge University Natural Science Club, Founded March 10th, 1872* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), iv. Dr. Nick Jardine, of the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at Cambridge University, was an active member in the 1960s: he recalled that everyone together ate the "whale" with the understanding that this action was a parody of the communion service reflecting the agnostic persuasion of its founding members. Email information, June 2000.
46. Cameron and Forrester, "A Nice Type of the English Scientist," and Laura Cameron, "Sir Arthur George Tansley," in Noretta Koertge, ed., *New Dictionary of Scientific Biography* (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2008), Volume 7, 3-10.
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48. Cameron, "Histories of Disturbance," 18.
49. See Kirsten Greer and Laura Cameron, "'Swee-ee-et Cán-a-da, Cán-a-da, Cán-a-da': Sensuous Landscapes of Bird-watching in the Eastern Provinces,

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 63. Felix Driver and Graeme Wynn, "Historical Geography in Kyoto," *Journal of Historical Geography* 36, No. 1 (January 2010): 105.
 64. See <http://sites.google.com/site/caghgsg/HGSG>, accessed June 2, 2010.
 65. Mitchell, *Historical Geography*, 332.
 66. *Ibid.*
 67. *Ibid.*