



# PRACTICING HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY

## On Cole Harris

*Don Mitchell*

In advance of a talk given at the 2001 Association of American Geographers Meeting, Cole Harris sent me four chapters of his forthcoming book, *Making Native Space*.<sup>1</sup> I am very glad that he did. In these chapters, and no doubt the book as a whole, a remarkable historical geography can be found—one that is at once expansive socially and theoretically *and* carefully documented and argued; as well as one that is both a vision of what a socially just geography of white/Indian relations in British Columbia could be *and* a damning (though still sympathetic) account of what they have been. This is historical geography at its finest, historical geography as it ought to be done. The reason it is such is precisely because of the passion for social justice that underlies it. That passion makes the hero of the book, or at least those portions I have seen, all the more startling and all the more interesting.

Cole Harris dedicates *Making Native Space* to Gilbert Malcolm Sproat. Indeed, the tale that Harris tells begins with the story of Sproat and his compatriots forcefully removing a band of Aht, or Nuu-chah-nulth, people from their lands at the head of the Alberni Canal. Sproat had bought the land from the crown, purchased it again from the Aht (against their will), and eventually made a show of ships and guns to get the people to move. As Harris remarks, this was colonial dispossession at its most unremarkable—“something of a model of a colonial encounter.” What makes Sproat remarkable, though, is his later work as the Indian reserve commissioner between 1878 and 1880. Headstrong and quite adept at alienating those he worked for, Sproat argued forcefully for expanding native reserves right at the moment that British Columbian settler society was agitating for their shrinkage. Sproat becomes Harris’ hero in the book because, in his words, “more than any other British Columbian of his day, Sproat would struggle to come to terms with the colonial dispossession of which he, himself, was a part. Because, more than any other, he would listen to the native voices that he encountered in many parts of the province.” Now, Harris’ detailed discussions of Sproat are hardly lauda-

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tory. Indeed, they show a deeply flawed man—one who by modern scales of judgment appears quite paternalistic, quite *unable* to listen to the voices of the native peoples he sought to define reserves for and quite *unable* to see native peoples as more than savages.

And yet, there *was* something deeply humane about Sproat; so for Harris he becomes a synecdoche for what contemporary British Columbians *could* be not despite his flaws but because of them. European-derived British Columbians *could*, Harris fervently wishes, “struggle to come to terms with the colonial dispossession of which [they were] a part” and thereby help begin to fashion a new kind of relationship between Indians and other settlers in British Columbia, and along with that, a new kind of Canadian identity and way of living. Sproat stands for the way that visions of justice can only come out of the messy struggle of flawed men and women hoping to find better ways to live within the world they have inherited.

This notion of a historical figure standing as synecdoche for the presentist objects of Harris’ scholarship is important because it sheds light on why it is important that the *historical geography* of the reserve system be uncovered and told. As I have noted, Harris begins his book with the tale of Gilbert Malcolm Sproat’s forceful dispossession of the peoples who lived at the head of the Alberni canal. He interrupts this tale to note that others have also engaged with Sproat. One that he singles out is the literary critic Christopher Bracken, who, Harris writes, draws on Heidegger, Derrida, and others to conclude that “Sproat had entered a zone of textual contradiction where ‘discourse consistently fails to do what it says it is doing.’” After several more wonderfully convoluted sentences in which Bracken’s position is both recapitulated and gently caricatured, Harris concludes that in Bracken’s telling, Sproat likewise stands as a synecdoche, this time for all of Europe and its contradictory colonial practices, practices that while contradictory, nonetheless seemed always to speak with one and only one voice. Harris then says, be that as it may, he “read[s] Sproat differently. For all the words in the background, what went on at the head of Alberni canal in the summer of 1860 came down to the forced displacement of a people.” *His* goal—Harris’ goal—is to show how that displacement was affected, what it meant to the people who lived it, and what it means to those who now live in British Columbia. That goal is accomplished through a careful reconstruction of the human geographies of the land, of how, in his words, “one human geography was ... superceded by another, both on the ground and in the imagination.” If Sproat is a synecdoche than it is for these messy processes of supercession, processes that in their details are at least as—and probably far more—important than the a study of the abstract textual strategies through which they were sometimes made known. As Harris says, “it may be important not to be too fancy with colonialism.”

And he is anything but fancy in this book. That is not to say he is not theoretically deft. Quite the contrary, this book is deeply social-theoretical, in a way that too little historical geography is. Not Derrida, but Frantz Fanon, becomes one of the key tribunes through which the colonial encounter is

read. Fanon is teamed, at different places in the text, with Foucault to explore the disciplinary structures of the reserve system, and with E.P. Thompson to understand how the reserves were a form of enclosure and indeed were in many ways descendants of the very enclosures that sent so many British Islanders to Canada to become the new enclosers. And he is paired with an impressive range of historians and geographers, many of whom are or have been educated or housed in Cole Harris' University of British Columbia geography department, to paint a vivid picture of both the violent and the slow and inexorable attempted extirpation (thankfully unfulfilled) of whole peoples.

All that theory is there, but it is not fancy. No, what drives this work, what gives it its force, its power, is the historical record, a record marshaled to show just how the lines around native reserves in British Columbia were drawn, erased, drawn again—and how they may, how they *should*, be drawn or erased in the future. This record shows that the process of establishing reserves was neither easy, nor straightforward. New techniques and technologies had to be learned—new forms of surveillance, new means of, in Harris' rephrasing of some of Fanon's most powerful words, creating for natives "a world without spaciousness," and new means of turning land into property. These are all themes that are exceptionally important in critical geography and other fields, but they are ones all too rare in historical geography.

For that reason, I was a little surprised, in fact, not to see the opening of a discussion in what I read, especially in the important series work on very similar issues by Matthew Hannah. Hannah's new book, *Governmentality and the Mastery of Territory in Nineteenth-Century America*,<sup>2</sup> also has an unlikely hero, one not at entirely unlike Gilbert Malcolm Sproat. The hero of *Governmentality and the Mastery of Territory* is Francis Amasa Walker, superintendent of the United States Census, head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and one of the key developers of precisely the tools that allowed Indians (and others) to be placed so as to be seen. Walker is less of a sympathetic character than Sproat, but what drove them was remarkably similar. What drives Hannah and Harris, at least to my reading, is also remarkably similar. Both want to get to the bottom of the parceling of space as a means of emplacing a new modern, capitalist sensibility, an emplacement that necessarily meant and continues to mean the displacement of presumably non-modern peoples. Both want to get to the bottom of this so that new, more just spatial worlds can be built, and both at the same time want to transform—or are in the act of transforming—just what historical geography can and should be. I raise Hannah's name and book here, not really to chastise Harris for not having drawn on it and cited it, but to show that there is actually something afoot in historical geography, something that is good not just for this small corner of the discipline, but for geography as a whole and even more for critical scholarship in general.

This something can be said very simply: historical geography now has a body of work, at which Harris stands at the head, but which encompasses such diverse work as George Henderson's *California and the Fictions of Capital*,<sup>3</sup> Anne Knowles' *Calvinists Incorporated*,<sup>4</sup> Dan Clayton's *Islands of Truth*,<sup>5</sup>

and Robert Lewis's *Manufacturing Montreal*,<sup>6</sup> to name just a very, very few that is deeply theoretical without sacrificing—indeed that relies on—empirical richness. This empirical richness is exactly what licenses and grounds the theory, that gives it its force (a force well beyond the vast majority of what is being produced in cultural studies or social theory in general). What's more is that this work is all, often in very different ways, deeply historically materialist in approach and effect. It is, consciously or unconsciously, fulfilling the mandate that David Harvey set 18 years ago in his “manifesto” for a materialist geography—a manifesto that argued that it was imperative that all geography become historical and that it become a *people's geography*. As Harvey then wrote:

The geography we make must be a peoples' geography, not based on pious universalisms, ideals, and good intents, but a more mundane enterprise that reflects earthly interests, and claims, that confronts ideologies and prejudice as they really are, that faithfully mirrors the complex weave of competition, struggle, and cooperation within ... shifting social and physical landscapes.... The world must be depicted, analyzed, and understood not as we would like it to be but as it really is, the material manifestation of human hopes and fears mediated by powerful and conflicting processes of social reproduction. Such a peoples' geography must have a popular base, be threaded into the fabric of daily life with deep taproots into the well-springs of popular consciousness. But it must also open channels of communication, undermine parochialist world views, and confront or subvert the power of dominant classes or the state. It must penetrate the barriers to common understandings by identifying the material base to common interests. Where such a material base does not exist, it must frankly recognize and articulate conflict of equal and competing rights that flows therefrom. To the degree that conflicting rights are resolved through tests of strength between contending parties, so the intellectual force within our discipline is a powerful weapon and must be consciously deployed as such, even at the expense of internalizing conflicting notions of right within the discipline itself.

If Gilbert Malcolm Sproat stands as a *synecdoche* in Cole Harris' work, then it is for just this kind of a geography, just this kind of a vision of how a more just world can be constructed out of the often ugly realities of the past. Deep into his narrative, Harris pauses to write of Sproat, “He stands out now as a brave and remarkable failure, a poignant reminder that colonialism speaks with many different voices, that Native people were working out their own adaptation with the new world that colonialism had thrust upon them, that a few whites, Sproat the most notable among them, were listening, and that there were alternatives to the dark path we have taken.” That's a remarkable sentence and one that is hard won through the careful analysis of the record. It is no mere speculation, but rather a considered and passionate analysis, exactly the payoff allowed by the sort of theoretically rich and empirically nuanced historical geography Harris writes.

I first learned that such a passionate, rich, justice-driven but still realist, historical geography was possible from my master's advisor Deryck Holdsworth, who was one of Harris' students. It is the kind of work that Holdsworth has always tried to do, and he has always insisted that it was very much the model—or better yet, the scholarship and teaching—of Cole Harris that made all the difference. I've seen a similar passion and care and sense of justice in the work of Harris' other students. Now it is even easier for me to see how powerful that model—that scholarship and teaching—has been for me, for these are my goals too, and they are ones that I am more than happy to credit to influences—even heretofore unmet and indirect influences—like Harris. His work is the kind of work we should all be striving to do.

## Notes

1. The following remarks are a slightly revised version of a commentary I presented in response to Harris' lecture. I have retained as much as possible the flavor—and informality—of those remarks. Since the portion of *Making Native Space* I read was in manuscript form, I do not have page numbers for the quotations I draw from it. I hope that I give enough of the flavor of the book to encourage interested geographers to read it for themselves when it is published.
2. Matthew G. Hannah, *Governmentality and the Mastery of Territory in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
3. George Henderson, *California and the Fictions of Capital* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
4. Anne K. Knowles, *Calvinists Incorporated: Welsh Immigrants on Ohio's Industrial Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
5. Daniel W. Clayton, *Islands of Truth: The Imperial Fashioning of Vancouver Island* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000).
6. Robert Lewis, *Manufacturing Montreal: The Making of an Industrial Frontier, 1850 to 1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).
7. David Harvey, "On the History and Present Condition of Geography: An Historical Materialist Manifesto," *Professional Geographer* 34 (1982): 1-11 (quotation from p. 7); now republished as part of Harvey's *Spaces of Capital* (New York: Routledge, 2001).