

# Reappraising David Livingstone's *The Geographical Tradition*: A Quarter of a Century on

**Abstract** The quarter of a century since the publication of David Livingstone's (1992) *The Geographical Tradition* provides an apt moment to reflect on the book's theses, lacunae and legacies, and to take stock of the ways in which its provocations and reception might instruct the wider project of rendering the discipline's history. In framing this themed intervention, we engage the assertion that contextualisers need contextualising; there exists scope to heighten awareness of the location within time, space and culture from which contextualist historiographies of geography are written. We call attention to the meaning and implications of the particular and situated contextualist methodology mobilised and executed in *The Geographical Tradition*.

**Keywords** Geographical Tradition, Science, Classics, Empire, Historiography.

Framed by a striking cover-image of a painting by Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer depicting a seventeenth century geographer at work (titled *The Geographer* and signed and dated 1699, see Figure 1), David Livingstone's (1992) *The Geographical Tradition: Episodes in the History of a Contested Enterprise* quickly became a milestone, shifting the ground in scholarship on the history of Geography.

---INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE---

Livingstone detected two critical flaws in existing historiographical accounts: 'presentism' or interpreting past geographical ideas by the (scientific, moral, and aesthetic) standards of today, and 'internalism' or construing the evolution of the discipline in terms of interior drivers of change (scholarly fields, their champions, spats, alignments and plays). Refusing to label and police the boundaries of his alternative approach too strictly, he invoked the simple yet powerful idea of 'situated messiness': all intellectual endeavour, including the practice of creating, disseminating, and ingesting geographical knowledge, is best thought of as a situated social practice inextricably embroiled in the wider social, economic, political and intellectual dramas of the day. In particular, the history of geography could not be told apart from a history of European capitalism, empire, racism and science. There followed a polymathic reading of over 500 years of 'episodes in the history of a contested enterprise', incorporating inter-alia geography's entanglements in:

the age of reconaissance; the scientific revolution and its alter ego, alchemy; the European enlightenment and age of reason; the pre-Darwinian expedition tradition; Darwinism and the institutional politics of the nineteenth century European academy; European imperial expansion, colonisation and scientific racism; shifting understandings of the nature/culture nexus, and; technological change and the quantitative revolution.

Amongst the blurb endorsements, Peter R. Gould (1932-2000) wrote that this is the ‘book that will become *the core* of all courses and seminars in the history and philosophy of our field’. And given the status it quickly acquired, it is unsurprising that *The Geographical Tradition* has inspired periodic re-reading and reappraisal as well as celebration. Werrity and Reid (1995 196) described it as a book that could ‘send one running down the corridor doing cartwheels’. For Spedding (2008 160) “The history of Geography often thought of as the poor relation to ‘proper’ contemporary research, received a major boost”. Mayhew observed that responses “came from scholars across the spectrum of human geography, rather than being restricted to a coterie of historians of Geography” (Mayhew et al. 2004 228). *The Geographical Tradition* has therefore shaped subsequent histories of the discipline, including later editions of one that first appeared 13 years before it was published (Johnston and Sidaway, 2016). Without prejudice to the rich diversity of scholarly reflection it has provoked, other noteworthy engagements include: David Hooson’s book review in *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers*, Gillian Rose’s book review in *History of the Human Sciences*, and Gregory Good’s book review in *ISIS: A Journal of the History of Science Society* (all 1993); Driver et al’s (1995) ‘open-ended discussion of the possibilities and limits of thinking about [and transforming] ‘traditions’ of geographical enquiry’ published in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*; a set of reviews and a response (Withers et al., 1996) published in *Ecumene* (now *Cultural Geographies*); an interview with David Livingstone conducted by Hoyler, Freytag and Jöns (2002) in Heidelberg following his 2001 Hettner Lecture; and Mayhew’s (2015) reflections upon canonical texts in human geography published in the *Journal of Historical Geography*.

Prior reviews and several of the essays that follow signal the significance of the fact that *The Geographical Tradition* arrived at a moment, when, in the wake of all kinds of turbulence, Geography was again having to struggle for identity, coherence and sometimes existence. Such struggles in the past, as in the post-war elimination of Geography at

Harvard (Smith, 1987), arguably fed into the discipline's drive to re-make itself as scientific. Later struggles (from the 1990s onwards), centred often around managerial efforts to rebrand and rename Departments and Schools of Geography, wrestled with questions about Geography's purpose, marketability and focus and spurred defensive turns to relevant or applied research putatively high in impact (Castree, 2011; Frazier and Wilke, 2017; Hall et al., 2015; Lahiri-Dutt, 2019). In these contexts, Livingstone's rich historiographical account has surely provided useful reassurance to many geographers. The book was both scholarly and yet accessible enough to garner wide readerships. It could be read as an advanced-level textbook (a mark of its origins, as Livingstone reveals below) and as a powerful research monograph: a rare combination (Sidaway and Hall, 2018). In both capacities it profiled and itself displayed scholarly intensity and intellectual gravitas in/for Geography; a path to legitimacy and influence. *The Geographical Tradition* has existed as a point of reference in a sea of change. Moreover, Livingstone's celebration of diversity, fluidity plurality and entangled traditions - 'messiness' - gestures to the scholarly merits of multiple geographical traditions.

We use the occasion of book's twenty fifth anniversary to reflect once more on its virtues, vices, and ongoing significances. Certainly, this anniversary begets curiosity about the longevity and resilience of the book and its capacity to remain vital. But our purpose is to do more than celebrate a birthday. Whilst not alone, *The Geographical Tradition* proved key in advancing the case for historicising, relativizing and provincializing geographical philosophies and practices - indeed something called Geography period - and giving scholarly and eloquent expression to the kinds of archival methods, analytic instruments, and modalities of narration such a project might demand. No single book of course can bear the weight of responsibility for a historiographical method and no historiographical method ought to be held accountable on the basis of a single book. However, it is our supposition that the quarter century since *The Geographical Tradition* was published provides an apt moment to reflect not only once again on the book's core theses, lacunae, and legacies, but also to take stock of the ways in which its provocations and reception might instruct the wider project of rendering the discipline's history contextually.

The papers that follow began life in London at a panel session of the 2017 Annual Conference of the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers). We asked panellists to consider earlier engagements with the book, to revisit as well as

bring updated and perhaps some fresh perspectives to bear. The conference theme in 2017 was ‘Decolonising geographical knowledges: opening geography out to the world’, a theme which elicited an early response, questioning “why this pursuit of critical consciousness via a decolonial approach could do more harm than good, in a discipline that may not be ready to, or even capable of, responding to the challenge of decolonisation” (Esson et al., 2017 384). In setting the scene we were also mindful of feminist and queer theory confrontations with human geography’s modes of masculinity and its metropolitan and imperial theoretical and methodological inheritances. The ongoing reconfigurations of geography in and through fiscal crisis, post-crash neoliberalism redux, a fourth (cyber-physical and digital) industrial revolution (succeeding, steam, electric and electronic ones) and attendant socio-spatial shifts; climate change, accompanied by reworked environmental determinisms, as Livingstone and the late Doreen Massey (2004) noted in a wide-ranging discussion; post-imperial migration corridors, right-wing populism, historical and contemporary imaginaries of ‘race’ (on which *The Geographical Tradition* provided a detailed exposé of Geography’s complicity) and the reworking of and challenges to racism in geography and; further ‘quantitative revolutions’ in geographical science wrought by big data, geo-computation and cartographic innovations (geo-visualization).

In framing the set that follows, we also want to re-awake the distinction between ‘analytical reason’ and ‘dialectical reason’. The former, a remnant of the ‘long seventeenth century’ European Enlightenment construes reason as positivist and independent of any particular rational system; the latter, rooted in historical materialism holds reason to be historically embedded, relative to a socially constructed system of logic and therefore constituent. Contextualist framings of the history of Geography have helped scholars of the discipline to better understand that all reason is produced *within history*; lacking in self-understanding, analytical reason is simply a form of dialectical reason that is unconscious of its own historicity. We better appreciate the significance of *placing* geographical traditions; how these traditions emerge in time and space and bear the imprint of the worlds in which they emerge, dwell, flourish and wither. But by extension, constituent reason can only be understood historically: all acts of contextualising themselves need contextualising if their analytic rationalities, cultural frames and politics are to be fully grasped. Whilst widely acknowledged, perhaps this observation warrants more intensive interrogation than has been the case thus far.

In this introduction, and with respect to *The Geographical Tradition*, we call attention to the impact of the proximity of historians in time, space and culture to the geographical traditions about which they write, especially as this proximity bears on their capacity to apprehend particular traditions contextually, the choices they make concerning which voices best articulate traditions and therefore whose biographies merit contextualisation, and the ends to which they dedicate their endeavours to locate, situate and place traditions.

*The Geographical Tradition* undoubtedly broke new ground in its relentless scrutiny of the reciprocal constitution of text and context and its sustained contextualist interrogation of geography, Geography and geographers. For Withers (2001, 4) a key to *The Geographical Tradition* was Livingstone's "insistence that we must situate geography historically *and* geographically". Still, below Van Meeteren contends that Livingstone applied his contextualist methodology with varying degrees of intensity between chapters and in particular only lightly in his chapter on Geography's 'spatial science' tradition. Falling prey itself from 'internalism', this chapter he asserts, would have benefited from a more thorough going historicisation and politicisation. It is at once glib but also accurate to assert that particular challenges attend to the production of histories of the present. Certainly, Van Meeteren's critique is especially significant in the light of the urgent need to place Geography's most recent turn to big data, geocomputation, and spatial statistics, within the context of new waves of science predicated upon data-intensive scientific discovery and the rise of data driven economies, artificial and intelligence, machine learning and smart and automated systems. But his intervention also begets a larger question: do there exist historical, analytical or political reasons for supposing that some episodes in the history of Geography are more difficult to contextualise than others? Or to put it another way, do particular subject positions make it harder to provincialise certain geographical traditions?

*The Geographical Tradition* is littered with allusions to its inescapable partiality and bias: by explicit self-admission this was Livingstone's constitution rather than reconstruction of the history of Geography; his episodes and narrative thereof. It is unfair and undoubtedly frustrating for Livingstone then when critics expose the partisanship of the book as a significant shortcoming, succumbing themselves on occasions as he notes both elsewhere and below to presentist readings of the text. Still, it is worth recalling Anne Godleska's

(1999 315) observation in *Geography Unbound*: “Taking a history of ideas approach to the concept of ‘tradition’ as does Livingstone - following a particular line of descent - de-emphasizes the exclusions, the contestations, the lulls, the gaps, and the collapses in the history of Geography.” Contextualist approaches need to turn methodological principles such as ‘situated messiness’ more force-ably back against themselves and reflect upon the ways in which they too are conjuring historiographies of the discipline *within history*. And so we are forced to confront the limits, omissions, and exclusions inherent in the contextual reading offered in *The Geographical Tradition*. Below, each of Craggs, Ferretti, Maddrell (who builds on a key feminist critique of *The Geographical Tradition* by Rose, 1995, that also appeared in *Transactions*) and Van Meeteren identify absent figures, texts and voices – adding to those identified in previous engagements - which in their view skew the narrative developed in the book, a wider issue for histories of geography, that is perhaps more often reiterated as a problem than resolved (Keighren, 2018). Similarly, Scott Kirsch (in Keighren et al., 2017 255) notes how *The Geographical Tradition* had “served to open the subject” and had been “personally radicalizing in some ways”, but how “Today, to a more diverse and international graduate student population, and with situated histories of science becoming more or less mainstream, *The Geographical Tradition* seems helplessly Euro-centric”. Indeed. Engaging the book, one of us angrily asked ‘what still makes ethnically cleansed histories of geography possible?’ (Sidaway, 1997 77).

To what other ends should contextualist histories of Geography be mobilised? Or as Clive Barnett (1995) puts it more bluntly, why should we awaken Geography’s dead? As the promises of modernity ebb to exhaustion, the West stumbles from one crises to another and end of history arguments seem ever more incredulous, the possibility of *progress* in human geography too attracts ever-greater suspicion. Livingstone himself detects an unresolved tension between Whiggism and relativism in historiographical accounts. Of course Barnett’s question too can only be answered within history. Histories of geography are energised by time and place specific cultures of time consciousness and futurity. Perhaps an advance of sorts may be found in some postcolonial, feminist and queer ontologies of time; here whilst the meaning of history is conceived variously, the idea that history is simply teleology becoming conscious of itself is contested by the claim that history is better considered as claims of progress becoming conscious of their geographies. ‘Geographising Geography’ to use Livingstone’s own phrase indeed has an ongoing



critical role. Only by understanding our biographies will we understand the exceptional peculiarity of our lens and the potentialities and compromises which this lens affords and furnishes. And in this, in disentangling the making of some of those geographies, *The Geographical Tradition* is likely to continue to instruct and provoke.

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## Acknowledgements

Whilst the usual disclaimers apply, we thank Simon Naylor and the anonymous referees for their encouragement and comments on earlier drafts of this introduction and the set that follows. Ron Johnston and Henry Yeung also helpfully commented on an earlier draft. We are grateful to authors for their willingness to convert comments from what began as a conference panel session into the written texts here. We thank the History and Philosophy of Geography Research Group and the Race, Culture and Equality Working Group (both of the Royal Geographical Society, with the Institute of British Geographers) for sponsoring the panel at the 2017 Annual Conference of the RGS-IBG. Finally, we dedicate the set to the memory of John Davey (1945-2017) – the far sighted publisher who guided *The Geographical Tradition*, and many other noteworthy publications into print (Haggett 2018).

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**Figure 1 caption:** Johannes Vermeer, "The Geographer" 1669. Städel Musuem, Frankfurt am Main. Photo © Städel Musuem-ARTOTHEK as reproduced on the front-cover of *The Geographical Tradition*.