

Annual Conference 2012

Welcome from the chair of conference

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It is a great pleasure to welcome everyone to the 2012 Annual Conference, and it is an honour to have been nominated as Chair of Conference. I have many fond memories of 'Conference', and I had managed an unbroken record of attendance from the Durham 'IBG' in January 1984 through to the mid-2000s (when extended research leave to Canada and other life-course changes intervened). The landscape of academic geography – what and how we research and teach, forms of research assessment and governance, and much more besides – has changed dramatically over that period, and to an extent Conference has needed to shift in response, not least in the highly proactive role taken by the RGS-IBG in its organisation and structure. Nonetheless, I firmly believe that this annual meeting retains a vital role for British geographers (and, of course, overseas visitors) to profile their scholarly accomplishments, to engage with one another's most current work, and both to reflect back and cast forward in terms of where our discipline (and its many offshoots) has recently been and where it may be about to move. For me, Conference certainly functions as a catalyst for ideas, programmes and projects, as a crucial contact point between established and early-career researchers, and also as an opportunity to make and re-affirm the personal relationships which, in our increasingly competitive and time-disciplined academic habitus, are arguably harder to sustain than maybe once was the case.

It is a pleasure as well to welcome Conference to Edinburgh, the capital city of Scotland and a place of deep history, imbued with connections to matters of enlightenment, learning and indeed the pursuit of geographical inquiry, as Charles Withers has reminded us with characteristic erudition in various writings.¹ One way in which I am personally envisioning this year's Conference is as a *distributed conference*, partly because it is taking its tri-annual foray out of London to another corner of the UK and is hence 'distributed' from its normal ecological niche (of Kensington Gore in London). This notion also appeals to me because it captures a sense of Conference as distributed in various ways, with pulses of life 'all over the place' and not merely in some central hallways. Indeed, perhaps more so this year than in others, Conference arrives *both* as an exciting core of timetabled activities in the rooms centrally booked for the event *and* as a mix of many other activities, not just field-trips and field-walks – although, most pleasingly, we do have those taking place – but also a plethora of smaller-scale happenings, mini-conferences, symposia, site visits and the like, some not in but *en route* to Edinburgh, which have been set up by Research Groups, the Postgraduate Forum (whose invaluable PGF-ACTS training symposium will run on the Monday) and other collectives. For me, all of these activities can be badged under Conference, indicating that 'Conference' itself has become more than just the central formalities – important as those remain – and rather takes on the quality of an expanded occasion, a distributed network rather than a singular node, emblematic perhaps of what might be termed a 'post-institutional' discipline (still reliant on institutional forms but now potentially entailing so much more besides). Such a perspective will also be present, I anticipate, in the 'civic geographies' exhibition and panel discussion that I have had the pleasure of convening along with Kye Askins and Ian Cook. Many if not all of the distributed activities to which I have just alluded are referenced in this Conference Programme.

The theme that I have selected for this year's conference, **security of geography / geography of security**, seeks to explore the intersections between geography and security, working between: an 'inward-looking' concern for the well-being of geographical research, learning, teaching and communication; and an 'outward-looking' concern for how worldly geographies are deeply implicated in achieving or compromising the security of environments, peoples and communities. I have already written elsewhere² about the theme, and a free-to-access virtual collection has been made available of recent papers from the RGS-IBG's journals, which spiral around this theme.³ A key claim, however, might be that in both regards – the inward-facing (concerning geography itself) and the outward-facing (concerning the wider world) – the solution to fears about *insecurity* should not be a knee-jerk circling of the wagons: the rush to draw and police boundaries that neatly ring-fence, on the one hand, geography as a subject/discipline, or, on the other hand, portions of 'real' social-

eco-political space whose borders are then sealed against supposedly unwanted others (whether people, objects or ideologies). In highly condensed fashion, my own suspicion is that security can never be guaranteed through such acts of segregation, but can only be approached by an alternative 'geographical imagination' (to echo the theme of last year's conference) dependent upon reaching out, engaging, touching, being with and for others. It is about strengthening the connective sinews with other subjects/disciplines, scholars and institutions to enhance geography's own security; and, as perhaps a small but decisive contribution to worldly security, it requires – to paraphrase H.J. Fleure from a long-forgotten textbook – 'the student of geography' learning that 'the lives of people are bound up with the little bit of earth that is given to

each to love, understanding the links that bind them there,' while *also* being deeply attentive to the very different ones that bind them and their fellow peoples in all lands.⁴

I have been fortunate to be able to convene, with assistance from some of the RGS-IBG Research and Working Groups, a four-timeslot session on 'Geographies of (in)security'; and we have been able to assemble an impressive line-up of presenters who will be addressing this thematic across a range of landscapes, places and spatial scales (if I can still speak of 'scales'), with contributions on diverse forms of (in)securities pertaining to physical environments, 'natural' resources, political territories and the 'closer-in' spaces of everyday social life, emotions and bodies. There are three high-profile plenary lectures co-convened by myself as Chair in conjunction with other bodies which clearly link to the Conference theme: Simon Dalby on 'environmental (in)security'⁵ (supported by funds from the 30th International Geographical Union); Susan J. Smith on 'insecurity at home' (with the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*); and Charles Withers on 'cosmopolitanism and enlightenment' (with the *Scottish Geographical Journal*). There are then several lectures convened by other major geographical journals, some if not all of which chime across to the Conference theme: Nick Clifford on 'securing physical geography under globalisation' (*Progress in Physical Geography*); Klaus Dodds on 'popular geopolitics of insecurity' (*Geopolitics*); Stuart Elden on 'securing vertical geopolitics' (*Political Geography*); Katherine Gibson on 'securing community economies' (*Antipode*); Rachel Pain on 'domestic violence and insecurity' (*Social & Cultural Geography*); Kirsten Simonsen on 'new humanism and critical geography' (*Progress in Human Geography*); and Eyal Weizman on 'forensic architecture' (*Society and Space*). I am delighted (even humbled) at just how many of the other sessions, organised by Research and Working Groups or other collectives, are also addressing the conference theme in one way or another, for which I extend my deep thanks to the convenors and presenters involved. It is important that not all sessions are so orientated, of course, and it is hence to the good that there are also sessions growing out of quite other interests, trajectories and agendas, to my mind very obviously demonstrating the extraordinary health and vision of the Research and Working Groups and others (as well as the overall vitality of the UK's academic geography community).

Another plenary session – one which I felt it essential for Conference to include, but where my thanks lie with Rita Gardner, Jim Hanson, Derek Fabel, Stephen Royle and Mike Woods for making it happen – concerns 'geography and education', or more specifically the securing of geography as a subject/discipline in and, crucially, *between* schools and higher education. Echoing the first arm of my Conference theme, I do think that geographers operating in the university sector (and elsewhere) must always be attentive to, and if possible make interventions within, the teaching of geography at school-level, and of how national curricula, teaching agendas and methods, school student interests, aptitudes and objectives, and more besides, all impact upon the future health of geography as taught (and, ultimately, researched) in universities. To debate such matters should not lead to a defensive posture, the circling of the wagons mentioned earlier, but rather a constructive outreach not in the spirit of geographical 'imperialism' (our subject/discipline seeking to annex others!) but of demonstrating the inescapable centrality of a geographical sensibility to the efforts of all other subjects/disciplines when endeavouring to understand, explain and act within the wider world. (And, to be honest, such a stance is pretty much the one that I take as a professional geographical scholar when justifying my own approach to 'geography', notably in inter- or cross-disciplinary engagements.) Valuably, at Conference we also have a further journal-sponsored plenary lecture that will address a related set of questions for 'geography and education': namely, that by Rachel Spronken-Smith on 'securing futures for geography graduates' (*Journal of Geography in Higher Education*).

I wish to highlight three further aspects of this year's Conference. The first is the production of *testimonial theatre* by Caleb Johnston and Geraldine Pratt, which is an innovative vehicle for conveying the claustrophobic geographies of boredom, exploitation, loneliness and longing experienced by live-in Filipino workers in Canada.⁶ The second is the performance of several compositions by Drew Mulholland which will occur during the Monday night reception, to which all delegates are warmly invited. Drew Mulholland is an experimental electronic musician now electing to work with acoustic instrumentation, and in 2008 he was a Composer-in-Residence at the University of Glasgow composing works of what he has chosen to term 'musical psychogeography'.⁷ The third is our conference 'logo': this black-and-white evocation of Edinburgh Castle by Susie Wright, an illustrator and printmaker, who confesses to "have always had an interest in geography and landscape," and also to "enjoy[ing] making people the space around them."⁸ For me, Susie Wright's rendering of Edinburgh Castle – historically a site of militarised security, its massive walls speaking of a 'colonial' power that simultaneously protects and threatens – neatly softens the boundaries, converting a solid mass of stone (natural and built) into a more fragile, spidery, somehow more spectral presence. It is hence a play on the geographies of (in)security that, to me, compellingly resounds with the theme which I selected for this year's Conference.

Finally, in the preparatory work for Conference, I have already incurred a great many debts of thanks to various people – and I have no doubt that I will incur a slew more during the event itself. For the moment, though, I must say the most heartfelt thank you to the AC2012 team at the RGS-IBG, Catherine Souch, Stephanie Wyse and (Stephanie’s replacement while she enjoys the challenges of early motherhood) Joy Hayward: their professionalism is second-to-none, but so too is their enthusiasm, good humour and creative input at every turn to the academic shaping of the Conference programme (their work has been so much more than just ‘administrative’). I must thank the Edinburgh University Events Team, who have been our on-site facilitators, and who have engaged readily with all of our ideas and requests, even when moving a little way outside the usual conference ‘box’. I must thank Drew and his musicians for participating, Susie for allowing us to reproduce her image, and all of the convenors and presenters for their readiness to participate and their hard work (and flexibility) in getting the programme into its final, wonderful shape. I hope that you will enjoy this event, and appreciate, with me, the efforts of everyone who has been involved in ‘distributing’ this Conference to you.

Chris Philo, University of Glasgow

Notes

- 1 Withers, C.W.J. (1995) How Scotland came to know itself: geography, national identity and the making of a nation, 1680-1790, *Journal of Historical Geography* 21: 371-397; Withers, C.W.J. (1999) Towards a history of geography in the public sphere, *History of Science* 37: 45-78.
- 2 Philo, C. (2012) Geography of security/security of geography: Boundary Crossing essay, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 37: 1-7.
- 3 Blunt, A., Dodds, K., Ward, K., Wood, P. and Hatfield, M. (eds) (2012) Geography of Security/Security of Geography, virtual theme issue of *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, available at www.rgs.org/SecurityVI.
- 4 H.J. Fleure (1929) *An Introduction to Geography* (Sixpenny Library), p.79.
- 5 In what follows, I either use or, to save space, paraphrase (hopefully not too misleadingly) a presenter’s given paper title. Here, I should apologise for not mentioning all of the ‘special sessions’ that are running; rather, I have concentrated on those linked to the Conference theme, but this should in no measure be taken as attributing more value to them rather than to other contributions.
- 6 Pratt, G. and Johnston, C. (2009) Translating research into theatre, *BC Studies* 163: 123-132; Johnston, C. and Pratt, G. (2010) Nanay (Mother): a testimonial play, *Cultural Geographies* 17: 123-133.
- 7 For a sense of Drew Mulholland’s approach to ‘musical psychogeography’, and more broadly on the relations that he detects with geography in many possible guises, see Mulholland, D. with Lorimer, H. and Philo, C. (2009) Resounding: an interview with Drew Mulholland, *Scottish Geographical Journal* 125: 379-400.
- 8 The quotes here are from an on-line discussion between Meighan O’Toole, blog-curator, and Susie Wright at: https://myloveforyou.typepad.com/my_love_for_you/2008/03/although-all-of.html. For Susie’s own website, complete with many images, see: www.susiewright.co.uk.