Writing a book in physical geography

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Perhaps increasingly the currency of science is the paper in a well-cited international peer-reviewed journal. Why then would a physical geographer want to write a book? Possible motivations include both research and pedagogic reasons although often, as they should be, these two poles are comfortably blurred.

Why write a research monograph?

One of the challenges which has faced physical geography since the quantitative revolution is how to upscale detailed process measurements to address problems at landscape scale. Increasingly, technological changes such as high resolution remote sensing, cosmogenic isotope approaches to surface dating, and the computational power required for high resolution numerical modelling have begun to offer useful approaches to this problem. However, truly integrative quantitative models of landscape function require a basis in a conceptual model of sub-system interaction that is often lacking or simplistic.

The recognition of the importance of understanding connectivity within and between sub-systems in fields as diverse as geomorphology and landscape ecology (e.g. Brierly et al. 2006) emphasises the need to properly understand interactions between what might be quantitatively well specified landscape sub-systems. Clifford (2001) suggested that physical geography might be regarded as an emergent property of our detailed process investigations. Consideration of such emergent properties requires a reflective and synthetic approach to the data. There are questions about landscape function that cannot yet be addressed in a fully quantitative manner, in part because the conceptual underpinnings are not fully in place. Publishing at book length allows the physical geographer to establish narrative connections between substantive empirical findings. Essentially, the synthetic understanding of a particular landscape or physical system which can be developed in the less constrained format of the book has the potential to be an important tool in the development of the conceptual models, which can underpin further quantitative analysis at the landscape scale.

In addition to the academic reasons for book publishing there are also potential benefits in enhanced links with user communities. Many fields of physical geography have important interactions with the policy sphere. Writing a book is a useful way to communicate with the policy community. Whilst this community is actively engaged with the academic literature time constraints mean that they are perhaps more likely to refer to a considered synthesis of recent work than to your full oeuvre of journal literature. In this context, and given that funding for applied work is an important source for many areas of physical geography, it can only be a good thing to be identified as ‘that geographer from the University of Rummidge who wrote the book on…’.

My own experience of writing a book was a monograph in the RGS-IBG Book Series co-authored with Jeff Warburton (Evans and Warburton, 2007). The motivation to write the book came from the feeling that there was a larger story emerging from our ongoing work on peatlands, which required more space than the typical journal article to fully explore. In some senses it was also a manifesto aimed at influencing future peatland research to consider more fully the physical components of peatland systems. Only time will tell if we had any success in this regard but as the research assessment bureaucracies continue to demand ‘agenda setting science’ writing in book form is one way to develop and promote your preferred research agenda.

Whilst it may not be the primary purpose a well-written monograph is an important pedagogic tool, invaluable for upper-level classes and postgraduate students. It is, however, a rather different discipline to writing a targeted undergraduate textbook, which is considered separately overleaf.
Writing a book

Why write a textbook in physical geography?

The pedagogic motivation for writing a textbook is straightforward. As academics we all make use of textbooks as an organising framework. The basic role of the textbook is to propagate the accepted wisdom but across a range of subfields it is possible to identify textbooks that have been hugely influential in advancing a particular view of the discipline. Writing a textbook really is your chance to influence a generation of physical geographers both within and beyond academia. Textbooks are important in establishing paradigms and whilst the volume which overturns a paradigm may be a once in a generation event most books can play an important role in updating the accepted wisdom and perhaps subtly changing its emphasis. For this reason writing a textbook should not be seen as exclusively the role of longer serving academics. Many of the more valuable and innovative texts of recent years have been written or edited by relatively early career geographers.

Writing the book

What of the practicalities? Well the good news is that because book publishing remains something of a minority interest within physical geography publishers are often keen to receive proposals. In general, opportunities to write traditional monographs are fewer but there are some options, including the RGS-IBG Book Series. Once a contract is in place there is the small matter of writing the book. This is typically a departure in writing style for physical geographers raised on a diet of 6000 word papers and for most physical geographers the best comparison is probably with writing a PhD thesis. It will take longer than you think, and, like a PhD, the final editing and assembling of front matter and so on will take much longer than you think. Nevertheless, it is a rewarding experience and the satisfaction of seeing the finished product is considerable and if you end up on ‘Desert Island Discs’ in 30 years time you are more likely to be introduced as the author of ‘insert your latest greatest book’ than the author of 62 peer reviewed papers!

References


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Finding a publisher and publishing a book

Stephen Legg

Like most first time authors, I found the prospect of securing a publisher incredibly intimidating. The publishing world appeared to be a closed sect, which could only be penetrated by an ingeniously orchestrated series of applications, references, re-drafted proposals, and good fortune. The reality, thankfully, is much simpler. Most publishing houses have clear online applications for proposals, which should obviously be followed as closely as possible, and the lists of existing and forthcoming books and series provide a pretty navigable route to the most receptive editors. The application process also stressed to me the invaluable importance of seeking advice from colleagues and mentors, as well as from published sources (e.g. Germano 2001).

Your editor(s) will continue to offer you advice, so your preferred choice for publishing house should obviously be weighed up against the likely degree of editorial input. This will vary with regards to an individual editor, but also with regards to whether you are applying to publish a stand-alone book, one in a discipline-specific series, or a book in a subject-specific series. All of these have their advantages with regards to, for instance, a unique project, one seeking disciplinary exposure, or one in need of specialised advice and targeted publicity, respectively. These are not mutually exclusive categories of course. My experience with the RGS-IBG Book Series at Wiley-Blackwell showed that a series book can also be treated individually, and thus be marketed by other series/sections at the publishers, but also that the right choice of referees can secure expert advice, whilst still situating the work in a series that seeks a wider audience within the discipline of geography.

Many first time publishers will be using material from their doctorate, whether written directly up into a book, or as the basis for new directions of post-doctoral research. I was (well) advised during my viva and afterwards that a publisher might have difficulty accepting a proposal which, like my thesis, had two analytical frameworks (colonialism and nationalism) as well as the competing claims of theoretical work (on Foucault) and empirical work (on Old Delhi). I thus returned to do some research on my original case study of New Delhi and worked on a more thorough theoretical and historiographical exploration of my approach. These provided opening arguments for the book (Legg 2007), which then framed two chapters that were based on the first half of my thesis and some new research work.

This approach may also present opportunities to prepare research papers on topics of interest, which connect to the book material but do not fit into the proposed structure. While these papers can then be referred to in the book, one reviewer of my manuscript argued that if this material was relevant it should be in the book, if not then it needn’t be referenced. Each editor should have guidelines on this, as well as a policy on reprinting already published material. I personally found publishing papers a valuable means of securing extra feedback, as well as an outlet for pursuing more detailed theoretical and empirical sub-themes within the wider project (as well as the more pragmatic necessity of complementing a book proposal with other published material in order to find a job…). While publishing times vary, my book took a year from final submission to publication, which is substantially less time than it has taken several of my journal papers to make it into print. And while many young academics in the UK may be concerned that journal articles might be preferred as REF submissions, the rewards in terms of publicity and recognition are widely recognised and rewarded (especially within university frameworks regarding promotion etc). Good luck!

References


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