

An address given on the occasion of the Manchester Geographical Society's Centennial Lunch

by Lord Hunt of Llanfair Waterdine, K.G., C.B.E., D.S.O.

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It is always intriguing to look back to first beginnings. At Zermatt last August I recalled the great British mountaineers of the "Silver Age" of mountaineering with their redoubtable Swiss guides, present in that mountain mecca in August 1909. For myself, it was almost as though they were with us as we stood during a reception outside Monte Rosa Hotel. So it might be worth recalling a few of the events and personalities in the realm of geography in the year 1884: the year your Society was born. It was in the "Golden Age" of discovery when many of the secrets of the earth remained to be revealed.

Africa was "up for grabs" in the 1880's. In 1884, Joseph Thomson had just returned from his expedition into the interior from the East Coast, which was to lead to the British occupation of Uganda and Kenya. General Gordon was besieged in Khartoum.

In South America, Sir Everard Im Thurm was making his preparations to explore that still remote and little known territory which marks the frontier between Venezuela and Brazil. I found this early investigation of one of the few parts of the world which is still remote, most interesting, in view of the R.G.S., plans to mount a joint project in that area with Venezuelan scientists in 1982. Sadly, it was a casualty of the Falklands War.

In Central Asia, the Indian surveyors were performing amazing feats of courage and endurance in mapping the Himalayas. Everest had been identified 30 years before but it was in 1884 that the survey of India entertained doubts whether it was in fact the world's highest mountain.

In 1884 a conference in Washington D.C. fixed Greenwich as the International Zero Meridian. And among many personalities to choose from in that "Annus Mirabilis" let us recall Stanley, whose eager countenance commands my attention every time I enter our new Map Room at 1, Kensington Gore; his demeanour the epitome of resolve and a certain ruthlessness. It was Stanley who attended the delivery of this Society as an infant child. At that time he was held in high acclaim for his amazing river journey, purporting to discover the Nile, which carried him at great cost in human lives down some 3,000 miles along the course of the Congo to the Atlantic Ocean: a few years later he was to make that epic journey in reverse.

It was Stanley in his inspiring address to the Society in 1884 who set your course, endorsed by your first President J. F. Hutton, in aid of commerce. He waxed eloquent on the opportunities for Manchester's engineers to develop communications by rail and river in Africa. It is interesting to recall that the saintly Livingstone, with whom the name of Stanley is permanently linked, made commerce as well as christianity the purpose of his last journey in 1865. Stanley, I fancy was more single minded!

1884 was a propitious year for Manchester. "Cotton was King" here in the North of England. Potential markets for textiles were wide open in the new age of steam navigation. Indeed, there was a considerable demand for clothing to cover the nakedness of the innocent inhabitants of Africa: not, I suspect, so much for their benefit as to satisfy the sense of decorum and to match the code of morals of the Victorian missionaries.

Apart from your contribution to commerce, there has been the excellent work which your Society has accomplished in education, to which Professor Freeman has drawn attention in his record of your history. The need was urgent, it was in fact in 1884 that the Lord Aberdare, as President of the R.G.S., said in his annual address that "education in geography presented a dismal picture". In that same year John Scott Keltie published his report on the teaching of that subject and started the ball of progress rolling, at a time when it rated very low in the great public schools and was almost non-existent in our universities. It seems astonishing that a Chair in Geography should have been established in Manchester University as recently as 1929.

But anniversaries, while properly being occasions for looking back and paying tributes for work accomplished, are also an opportunity to look ahead. What of the Manchester Geographical Society as it enters its second century? I suggest that there is much to look forward to with hope and enthusiasm. I like to recall the much-quoted words of the Chronicler of Sir Martin Frobisher in 1576, that Frobisher: "resolved unto himselfe to go and discover the North-West-Passage, knowing that it was the last thinge in the worlde which was left undone". Well, even though that particular task eluded Frobisher and many others for a further three centuries, geographers seem to have survived and flourished to this day with plenty to do!

Of course there is a valuable future for your Society, even though physical exploration has advanced beyond the confines of our planet. I will mention three lines of activity, of vital importance today, which will not disappear nor diminish in the years ahead.

One is the theme of conservation of the rural environment, especially here in the North of England. I need hardly stress its importance and its topicality. It is increasingly a topic of public concern. I believe, with Professor Terry Coppock and other eminent geographers, that Societies such as yours should be active in the growing "green lobby", by the furnishing of factual evidence and in public relations through your programmes. This would be a valuable service in a vital area of our national life.

Second, there is the urban environment, with its acute and potentially dangerous social problems: the decay of our inner cities and the outspill of urbanization into the surrounding countryside. Here again is a legitimate and useful role for geographers. Like the rural environment, it includes field work and in this too, your Society has a part to play.

Third, there is the theme of youth: inherently (and despite any outward appearances) so eager to be involved, to matter, to be interested: so anxious about their future: so devoid of outlets, in an age of diminishing employment. So, organizing seminars and field studies, possibly within the ambit of Youth Training Schemes might be a valuable contribution to your city and regionally in the North.

I need hardly add that youthfulness is a key to survival of all societies. I believe that the key to the present vigour of the R.G.S. stems from the lead given to us many years ago by its then President, Lord Nathan. Today our associate membership, the lecture programmes and social activities of our young members' committee, our partnership with the Young Explorers' Trust and our hosting of the British Schools Exploration Society, are keeping the R.G.S., young in spirit. I venture to hope that your Society, too, welcomes young people into its fold.

In all these three lines of activity, you are exceptionally well placed, in a geographical sense, here in Manchester.

Writing about the future of the Royal Geographical Society shortly before your own Society came into being — the year was 1881 — its then Secretary, Clements Markham, gave it as his opinion that “it goes forward in the full assurance..... that it will have a long career of activity and success, and that its efforts to perform good work, and to encourage..... the labours of others, will constitute a service of national value and importance.”

I can do no better than express that confidence in the on-going work of the Manchester Geographical Society, in a regional context, and its value for the North of England.

Centenary Celebrations

After the Centenary Lunch, there was a visit to the Deansgate Building of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, to inspect an exhibition of atlases, many of which were formerly in the collection of the Society. A joint lecture in connection with this exhibition entitled ‘The Evolution of the Atlas’ was given by Professor W. C. Brice and Dr. B. P. Hindle on 24th October; their lectures are printed in this issue of the journal.

The centenary celebrations on the 16th October ended with a tripartite lecture (M.G.S.-R.G.S.-G.A.) given by Professor A. Goudie entitled ‘Desert Landscapes of the World’. The meeting was chaired by Sir George Bishop, C.B., O.B.E.